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The Heart of Fame

GILES PLAYFAIR



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1927

The Heart of Fame

by
GILES PLAYFAIR



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1951

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FOR
CAROL *and* AMANDA

*And I . . . long since I drew my bow
Straight at the heart of good fame, and I know
My shaft hit; and for that I am the more
Fallen from peace.*

— EURIPIDES

ALL CHARACTERS THROUGHOUT THIS STORY
ARE IMAGINARY, AND ANY RESEMBLANCE TO
ACTUAL PERSONS, LIVING OR DEAD, IS PURELY
COINCIDENTAL.

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Prologue

PROLOGUE

MY TAXI DRIVER stopped outside one in a row of uniform, red brick, two-story villas, with trim front gardens. I could hardly believe that Bella Sugeley lived here, but on his downright assurance that this was the address and that there was no duplicate, I consented to get out. Certainly the woman who opened the door to me was nothing like my preconception of her. This woman was neither fat nor blowzy, but thin and neat. She was dressed severely in black, and wore steel-rimmed spectacles and an air of middle-aged primness.

"I've come to see Bella Sugeley," I said doubtfully. "Is it Mrs. or Miss, can you tell me?"

"I'm Miss Sugeley. You must be Mr. Hunter. It's so nice to meet you." Her speech was faintly flecked with the ugly accent of Manchester, but her voice was unusually gentle.

She held out her hand, and I took it, hoping, as I murmured how-do-you-do, that my astonishment was not written clearly on my face. She invited me to make myself comfortable in the large arm-chair that had a footstool before it, and a little table by its side. "That's where *he* always sat," she said in a way that was at once deferential and possessive.

She asked me whether I came to Manchester often, and went on to discuss the war, remarking that she did not see (did I?) how Hitler could hold out much longer. Whatever her relationship with my friend Charley had been, I felt sure that this disarming and respectable little spinster had never been his mistress.

For the past six years I had been in America, having gone there in the first place to advise on the filming of my play, *Autumn Frolic*,

which may be remembered as the last play in which Charles Stranleigh ever appeared. We had parted on bad terms, and I had heard nothing of him at all since about 1936 when Algernon Hart, a mutual friend, wrote me that the "poor old fellow" had buried himself in some back street of Manchester, where he was "living with his landlady."

Shortly after my return to London in the spring of 1940, Charles Stranleigh died. The news had come as a shock to me. I remembered him, despite all his faults, as an intensely lovable man. He was, I believed, a genius; tragically erratic, unfulfilled, but still a genius.

I had read the obituary notices carefully. They were silent on the cause and course of his long professional activity. Nor did they mention the landlady to whom Algernon had referred; but since Charley had died in Manchester, I assumed he must have stayed with her to the end.

Some six weeks later I found at my club a letter from the woman herself, signed "Bella Sugeley." The name had struck me as most appropriate. She wrote that a fortnight before Charley "passed away," he had given her a small package and requested her to deliver it to me after his death "with her own hands," and she asked me to get in touch with her.

At the time I doubted there was a word of truth in what she wrote. I pictured her as vulgar, blowzy and gross. I thought she had invented a cock-and-bull story, her object being to get money from me, as someone who had once been a great friend of her lover's. Yet I so much wanted to meet the woman with whom Charley had spent the last miserable years of his life, and in the squalid surroundings they had shared, that I replied saying I would call on her the next week in Manchester, where I happened to have some business to conduct.

Now as I sat in the armchair where Charley used to sit, I looked across at Bella Sugeley as she sat stiffly on the edge of the sofa.

"How long," I asked her at last, "did Charley live with — did he live in this house?"

"It would be four, no five years next March. Yes, five years exactly."

"I suppose he was more or less an invalid?"

"He was a sick man when he came here, and it took a long while to get him on his feet again. But during the last three years he really did seem to be on the mend."

"Could he do anything active?"

"He didn't go out much — in fact, hardly at all. But he spent quite a lot of time gardening. We have a nice little garden at the back — I must show it to you before you leave. He was very proud of it."

"Was he?" I said, with a lift of the eyebrows.

I had begun to suspect that her part in Charley's life had merely been that of an exceptionally kindhearted landlady who had not insisted on payment of the rent and had turned a blind eye to all her lodger's violations of the proprieties. But evidently she meant me to understand that she had been a kind of wife to him, that he had lived quite peaceably and contentedly with her in suburban obscurity. Remembering the days of Charley's precarious glory, remembering the women who had tried in vain to control him, I found this utterly incredible.

"Didn't he *fret* a great deal about not being able to get back to the stage?" I asked.

"Oh, he could have gone back. The doctor said he was strong enough, and he had a lot of offers. I often hoped he'd make the try. But it wasn't my business to influence him; that wouldn't have been right. And I expect it all turned out for the best."

"Do you mean to say that he didn't *want* to go back?" I exclaimed. "That he preferred —"

"He valued his health so much. I really think he was half afraid. He was funny in that way. You can't really blame him, can you? After all, he'd done his share."

What she was saying was uncomfortably reminiscent of what Charley himself had said to me at our last meeting. I hadn't believed

him then, not for a moment. Perhaps, I still didn't want to believe what he'd said.

"Well, I can't help thinking it a tragedy," I said, "when he might have gone back, that nearly a whole generation of playgoers missed seeing him. Don't you believe yourself that the risk would have been worth taking?"

"He didn't," she said softly, intimating that in such matters she had never considered her own opinions to be of any consequence.

"Did you see him when he was at the height of his career?"

"It's a funny thing, but I never saw him on the stage at all."

"I suppose you realize," I said rather tartly, "that he was one of our finest actors?" I was thinking she could have persuaded him to return to his work, and had failed to do so out of indifference.

"The very finest," she replied with conviction.

"How do you know if you never saw him?"

"I heard him recite."

"Oh. When was that?" I asked more kindly.

"The last time was only a few days before he went away. You see, he was asked to appear at a big war-savings meeting here, and he felt it was his duty to accept, but at the last moment he couldn't bring himself to face the crowds. So he decided to make a recording instead. I went with him to the studio."

"I wish I could have been there."

"Would you like to hear the record?" she asked with touching eagerness.

"Oh yes, very much. Have you got it here?"

She went to a cupboard, and brought out a portable gramophone and a cardboard box. I took the gramophone from her, and made room for it on the table. She opened the box herself. The record was wrapped up in three separate coverings. I had the impression that she was revealing to me her most treasured possession. She wound up the machine, set the record in motion and placed the needle upon it. Then she sat down in an attitude of reverence, her back erect,

her hands folded demurely on her lap, her eyes looking straight before her.

The recording was of the Crispin speech from *Henry the Fifth*. After a brief announcement by an unidentified speaker, there was a momentary pause, and then, miraculously and unmistakably, Charley spoke:

What's he that wishes so?

My cousin Westmoreland? No, my fair cousin . . .

The voice, the famous, the matchless voice, was as strong, as beautiful, as faultlessly controlled as ever. And now this ghost voice brought tears to my eyes in remembrance and re-experience of something uniquely treasured, plunged me into deep contemplation and robbed me of the will to criticize.

"He was a great actor, wasn't he?" She asked the question as if she wanted reassurance.

Minutes must have passed. I noticed, although I had not seen her doing it, that she had closed the gramophone and replaced the record in its box. Once before I had been asked that same question by a woman who had also said it would be wrong to try to influence Charley. I answered, as I had done then, without weighing my reply.

"Certainly, he was a great actor."

"Why don't you write his biography?" she asked suddenly and almost pleadingly.

I smiled, for the idea was already forming in my mind. "Would you help me?"

"Oh no, I couldn't do that." She seemed shocked by the suggestion.

"Why not? I've a feeling you know far more about Charley than I ever did."

"Surely there would be no need to drag his private life into it. I didn't mean that kind of book at all. I meant just a tribute to his acting."

"Well, it's certainly something that should be done," I said, getting up. "But I'm not sure whether I'm the right person. I wonder whether I could be objective enough."

I wanted to ask her more questions, but not yet. First I had to think about my idea, and, perhaps, to carry it out. "I must go now — or I'll miss my train. But I'd like to call on you again, if I may."

"Oh, please do. Any time you're in Manchester."

She walked with me to the front gate. I'd already said good-by when she exclaimed, "Oh, dear, how silly of me! I almost forgot to give you the package. I shan't be a moment."

She came back, carrying with both her hands, as if it were a sacred offering, a fat, book-size, brown paper parcel. My name was scrawled on it in Charley's large, generous handwriting, and the sight of this brought back treasured and poignant memories. Once more I said good-by. With the parcel under my arm, I went on my way.

I guessed what the parcel contained before I opened it. I saw again the volume of Shakespeare's collected works, which was painfully familiar, although I had not thought of it for years. I reread the half-remembered inscription on the flyleaf: *To my beloved Charley, to wish him well in his career, from Jean.*

Now the truth that I had already suspected was fully revealed. I knew that Jean had been right and that I had been wrong: I had been wrong about one whose life I influenced profoundly.

Then I knew that I must write this book.

PART ONE

Jean

CHAPTER I

I FIRST MET Jean in the autumn of 1907. I was twenty-two at the time; she, perhaps a year younger.

I had come to Manchester some eight months before as an apprentice reporter on the *Daily Sentinel*. My ambition then was to be a dramatic critic, and this seemed as good a way as any to start. I had decided after coming down from Oxford that, though I was no actor, the theater always would be my chief interest and that the law was not for me. I had, therefore, renounced an opportunity to become articled to my father, who was a flourishing and fashionable solicitor.

I was a Londoner born and bred, and Manchester struck me at first as a kind of social Siberia. The town gave me the impression of massive and unremitting ugliness. I found, moreover, that it possessed no passably comfortable residential area, since its modern creators — the merchant princes — had chosen to build their homes well outside its limits: in the country twenty to thirty miles away from the hub of offices and factories and tram-lined streets.

It was impractical for me to live so far distant. The train service was, perhaps, adequate for those who came to work at nine in the morning and left at six in the evening, but not for a young reporter who had to be available for duty at any hour. My pay was meager, and, though my father supplemented it with an allowance, I could not afford to follow the example of those wealthy young people who thought nothing of chartering a "special" to take them home after a night on the town. I had, therefore, to make do with some bleak "diggings" in the suburb of Rusholme.

I was extremely lonely. The native Mancunians were inclined to resent the Londoner as someone who thought himself superior to them, and thus, even among my colleagues, I dared not explore common interests for fear of saying something that might unwittingly offend. In fact, during the early months of my stay I made only one social acquaintance. He was a young man called Blake (he is now famous as Sir Jasper Blake, one of our leading industrialists and a pillar of the Tory Party). He too was recently down from Oxford, a Londoner who had emigrated to Manchester to carve out a career. We shared a sensation of being exiled and, when we talked nostalgically of our "old lives," we frequently referred to London, quite unconsciously, as England.

My rooms in Rusholme I used for little more than sleeping. I wrote all my letters and took most of my meals at the Midland Hotel, a gaudy palace of up-to-date comforts, and for me an oasis of civilization, recently erected in the very center of the city. Manchester had several theaters which were visited by the best touring companies, and I went as often as possible to the theater, though usually alone, for Blake was not enthusiastic about the serious drama. I went regularly, too, to the famed Hallé concerts, but here again I usually went alone, for Blake was not a music lover. Despite these diversions, my leisure was inadequately filled. Worse still, my work bored me. I could not believe it would ever "lead anywhere." I knew I had no talent for reporting.

Then something happened to alter my outlook. In September, it became known that the gallant Miss Horniman had selected Manchester as the headquarters of an English Repertory Theater to be modeled on the Abbey Theater in Dublin with which her name was already linked imperishably. My paper employed but one dramatic critic, and the editor decided he must appoint an assistant to cope with the increased theatrical activity. I applied for the job and got it.

Not long afterwards, my father wrote to say that my cousin, Jean Craven, was joining Miss Horniman's company, and that I "might consider looking her up."

I did not remember ever having met Jean Craven. I knew her as a distant relative who had caused a stir in the family by going on the stage. Her widowed mother had been left badly off, and had been obliged to condone this rash step. I told myself that, as an actress, Jean must be dangerously alluring. And she was my cousin. I fancied myself falling desperately in love with her.

That was not to be.

To begin with, I found her mother with her. In those days, it was customary for anxious mothers to chaperone their daughters during the first few weeks or so of a new engagement away from home. Mrs. Craven hardly let Jean out of her sight during the month she was in Manchester.

Jean struck me as a well-brought-up daughter in the Victorian sense. She allowed her mother to do all the talking, seldom venturing either to agree or disagree with anything Mrs. Craven said. I could see she was pretty and also that she was an original. She was not more than five feet tall and her figure was unusually slight. All her features were small, with the exception of her eyes, which were large and deep and which I supposed could be very expressive, although I was able to read nothing revealing in them as yet. She had tiny feet and hands and a profusion of dark brown hair. There was a will-o'-the-wisp quality about her, and she almost gave the impression of being lighter than air. But she did not in the least resemble my preconception of an actress — or perhaps I should say "the actress." There was nothing startling or exotic in her appearance, and though she had dignity and poise of a kind, she had no grand manner.

Mrs. Craven welcomed me as the son of a wealthy relative. I did not care for her. She was a sour-faced woman in her late forties who talked too much, and often contradictorily. She would bemoan the fate that had made it necessary for her daughter to do anything so vulgar as act professionally, and then would boast of Jean's histrionic virtues and predict a glittering future for her. I was a snobbish young

man, and Jean's mother reminded me of family whisperings that my father's second cousin had married beneath him. She was, in fact, rather "common."

When, at last, she decided to leave Manchester, she invited me to come with Jean to see her off at the station. It was an embarrassing experience. She wouldn't engage a porter, and I was encumbered with most of her luggage. As we made our way painfully up the length of the platform in search of an empty compartment, she complained without pause of her poverty. She should not be leaving Jean like this, she said. But what else could she do? She could not afford to stay on in Manchester indefinitely, when there was her home in London to be maintained. There would be nothing left out of Jean's salary if she did and Jean needed to save money to buy new clothes and "suchlike."

There was no empty compartment, but I found a corner seat for her. I heaved her luggage onto the rack, and closed the door behind her. She let down the window, leaned out and began her tale of woe all over again. Jean stood mute, while I emitted occasional bleats of sympathy. At last the whistle blew. Jean stepped forward stiffly and was enfolded in a lachrymose embrace.

Then Mrs. Craven shook hands with me. "Good-by," she said, "it's some comfort to know you'll be here. I rely on you to look after my little daughter while I'm gone."

The train moved slowly away, and we watched Mrs. Craven until she was out of sight, her right hand fluttering, her left hand dabbing her eyes with a handkerchief.

Jean turned, and we started to walk back down the platform. She seemed altogether oblivious of my presence. Then suddenly she exclaimed, "Oh dear. Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear."

I looked at her, and noticed to my surprise that her face was alight with merriment. For the first time since I had met her, she seemed alive, a personality in her own right.

"I'm afraid you've had a horrid morning," she went on. "I hope you're not cross."

"Not a bit," I said. "I was delighted —"

"Oh no!" She laughed irrepressibly. "You couldn't have been delighted. You couldn't possibly have been."

We had reached the station exit, and she told me I need not bother to see her home as she supposed I'd "get into trouble" if I stayed away from my work any longer.

"I don't have to work by the clock, thank goodness," I said. "But I do like to eat by the clock; and since your mother has left me, as it were, *in loco parentis*, I think I have a right to ask you to lunch with me."

"Where?" she asked, without waiting to be coaxed.

"I suggest the Midland Hotel."

"Oh, but isn't that very grand?"

"Not as grand as all that," I answered airily.

"Well, cousin," she said, "if you're sure you can afford it —"

She was suddenly free. It was like taking an appealing child out to lunch. She was impressed when the headwaiter recognized me and addressed me by name. She reveled in the good things to eat, clapping her hands with delight when she saw that *crème caramel* was on the menu. She was apparently unconscious of any need to conform to a social pattern of behavior, and there were moments when her attention had obviously wandered from me and she looked as if she were far away in a world of her own imagining.

Her conversation was engagingly spontaneous. She asked me, rather disconcertingly, why I wanted to be a dramatic critic, and I replied by asking her why she wanted to be an actress.

"I don't want to be any sort of actress," she said. "I want to be *Trelawny of the Wells*. After I'm Trelawny I'll probably retire."

"Or get married."

"Perhaps I'll never marry."

"I think you ought to marry an actor and start a great new theatrical partnership like the Bancrofts."

"I'm sure I won't do that."

"Why not? Don't you like actors?"

"Some of them are quite nice. But they're not really my kind."

"Who is your kind?"

"No one. I'm unique."

She laughed when she said this; but clearly she meant it, and I agreed with her, for it seemed to me impossible that anyone else could, after two years on the stage, be so unsophisticated. Yet, while I was convinced she was no *poseuse*, I got the impression that her immaturity of manner was not the whole cause of her "uniqueness," that, on the contrary, she must be using it as a deliberate concealment of something in her which set her apart. Before our luncheon was over, I discovered one subject at least on which she felt strongly.

I was telling her jokingly that now that I had been appointed her guardian she would have to obey me. Her eyes became serious and there was a suspicion of anger in her voice as she said:

"I don't need a guardian."

"Your mother thinks you do," I answered.

"I hate my mother," she snapped.

There was a pause, and then she asked, "Are you shocked?"

I felt like telling her I was in hearty agreement, but for some reason I found myself playing the part of the guardian in earnest.

"No," I said, "because I don't believe you mean it."

"I do mean it. I hate my mother. If you're her friend, I'm afraid I shan't be able to see you any more."

"I hardly know your mother. But I'm certain she's very fond of you."

"As she is of an old trunk; she wants to own me. She thinks if I ever become rich and famous she'll be rich and famous too. She follows me around everywhere. I told her I'd resign from the company if she stayed here any longer. She made an awful fuss. She threatened to commit suicide. Sometimes I wish she would."

"You shouldn't say that even in fun."

"I do say it. Perhaps I'll kill her myself one day. Then I suppose I'd be hanged. I wouldn't mind. I think I am meant to die young."

I was embarrassed. As a young man of my day and generation, I was unused to such emotional confidences.

However, there were no more of them. During the next few weeks, I had several meetings with her and she did not mention her mother again.

Ours developed into a curious relationship. I found her an agreeable companion and an amusing one, too, with her usual high spirits and unconscious, disarming humor. My manner must have grown increasingly that of an elderly relative, because soon she was calling me "Uncle Paul" in mock veneration of my twenty-two years and worldly wisdom.

I liked her and I believed she liked me. Yet the more I saw of her, the less I knew her. I still had the impression that she was hiding her true self from me. More than ever I was puzzled by what she had called her uniqueness. Sometimes a bewildered look came into her eyes, and I wondered if she felt lost and lonely. At other times I suspected she was enjoying a huge private joke at my expense.

Often there was an instinctive shrewdness even in her light-hearted remarks. I felt she would never be equipped to play a leading part unless someone wrote a play especially for her. At the same time, her personality, with its freshness and quicksilver charm, was fully revealed on the stage so that she could make almost any part, however small and unrewarding in itself, stand out. She seemed indifferent to her own limitations and merits. She seldom mentioned her work, and, when I did so, was inclined to turn the conversation. Having confided her ambition to play Trelawny (an odd ambition for her, I thought) she had apparently told me all she wished to tell — or all there was to tell.

The only member of the repertory company of whom she talked was Renee Logan, a girl of her own age, with whom she now shared rooms. Renee, I gathered, was an American who had money of her own and a certain social independence to which most English girls were not accustomed. For her Jean evidently felt admiration; her chatter was sprinkled with repetitions of Renee's sayings and ac-

counts of Renee's doings. She said she would like to introduce me to Renee but feared I might lose my heart to her, for apparently Renee was irresistible to all men. "And then," she said cheerfully, "I should be jealous."

One of my duties as assistant dramatic critic was to cover the amateur productions. This was tedious, for most of them were deplorable. My editor insisted, partly, I suppose, because he wanted to cater to local pride and partly because he thought it might be possible to unearth native talent which Miss Horniman could use.

On a Saturday evening at the end of November I was to attend a production of *The Tempest* by a group of Blackley parishioners in behalf of their church fund. I asked Jean to come with me.

"I should warn you," I told her as we settled back in the cab, "it will probably be quite awful."

"Oh I hope not, Uncle Paul. I love *The Tempest*."

"I doubt if you'll even recognize it."

When I saw the church hall, I thought there was little likelihood either of us would do so. Rows of wooden chairs with insufficient leg room between them reached to within a few inches of a badly hung curtain. The back rows were already filled — presumably by friends and relations of the cast, who did not wish to embarrass or be embarrassed by too close a proximity to the stage.

"How lucky," said Jean, "we can sit in front."

"Not in the very front," I begged.

"Oh yes, please," she said. "Otherwise I shan't be able to see a thing."

After what seemed an interminable time the lights were extinguished, the curtain was drawn apart a few inches, and a lamp, evidently attached to the end of a long pole, was thrust through the aperture. Then a tremendous hubbub of assorted noises was set up and sustained to such effect that not a distinctive word could be heard above it. It ceased abruptly. The lamp was perilously withdrawn, the curtain was closed again, and that was the end of the

shipwreck scene. The applause was loud. Unfortunately it did not last long enough to cover the ensuing wait.

"Oh dear, do you think something's gone wrong?" Jean asked.

"Probably," I said. "You have to expect this sort of thing. It's nothing out of the ordinary."

At last the curtain was drawn, revealing what was evidently a number of chairs and tables stacked together and covered with some faded and tattered green canvas to represent the island scene. Seconds passed, and nothing happened on the stage, while urgent mutterings could be heard from the wings. Then Miranda made a flustered and apparently reluctant entrance. She reached the center of the stage, looked desperately behind her, to the right and to the left, and with a hopeless gesture as much as to say this wasn't her fault, walked off again. More seconds passed and more mutterings were heard from the wings. Then, haltingly, the curtain was pulled to.

"Oh, what *has* happened?" said Jean. She was laughing helplessly. The tears were trickling down her cheeks. "I know I shouldn't, Uncle Paul. But it *is* so funny."

The scene began again. Miranda re-entered, and this time was followed by Prospero. Suddenly I was aware of something exciting and unexpected.

I had assumed Prospero would be a more than usually green and gawky amateur. He was nothing of the kind. His bearing was appropriately venerable, but there was a kind of careless ease about it. He walked onto the stage as though he owned it and had arrived — belatedly, for some reason beyond his control — to claim his own.

His appearance was greeted by indulgently derisive applause. He stepped forward and bowed, gracefully but somehow commandingly. With that bow he silenced the audience, forcing them to take both his performance and the whole production seriously. I glanced at the program in my hand. Prospero was played by a Mr. C. C. Stranleigh.

Jean, too, though she continued to laugh when mishaps occurred, was impressed by the Prospero scenes. She leaned forward, her hands clasped before her, and several times exclaimed, "Oh, I love

The Tempest. I love *The Tempest*." Yet she made no comment on Prospero's acting, and I refrained from questioning her. My understanding of histrionics at this time was no more than instinctive, so I cannot now attempt to appraise Stranleigh's performance. What impressed me most, however, was his voice, which struck me as one of extraordinary sweetness. And he possessed even then the rare quality of repose: the ability, among other things, to remain immobile without coming out of character or picture while others were speaking.

The curtain stayed open when the play was over, and, after the minister of the church had made a brief speech, members of the audience surged onto the stage to congratulate the cast.

"Ee, that's a right fine getup an' all," exclaimed a fat, florid lady who was evidently Caliban's mother. "We'd never have recognized yer, would we, Pa?"

"Not if yer hadn't uttered," replied the other less effusive parent.

I was standing distractedly, waiting until we could leave without pushing against the crowd, when suddenly Jean plucked me by the sleeve. "Look, Uncle Paul," she said. "He's all alone. Let's go and speak to him." Before I could protest she was making her way towards Prospero, who stood apart, and I was following at her heels. "May I introduce myself?" she began, "I'm —"

"I know who you are," he said.

"Who?"

"Your name is Jean Craven. Mine is Charles Stranleigh. How do you do?"

Jean turned to me with a look of sublimity on her face.

"See, Uncle Paul," she exclaimed, "I'm famous. I've been recognized. It's the first time it's ever happened to me."

"I recognized you the moment I came on," said Stranleigh. "You were sitting in the front row."

"That's right. With Uncle Paul. Oh I'm sorry — this is Mr. Hunter. Mr. Hunter, this is Mr. Stranleigh."

We shook hands. At the moment I was as amazed by the man as

I had been impressed by the actor. I guessed he was roughly my own age and in a considerably humbler way of life than I. Yet he had the self-assurance and the old-world manner of someone — well, of someone as venerable and prosperous as my own father.

"Is he really your uncle?" he asked Jean.

"No. He's really my third cousin. But I call him Uncle because he's a year older and so serious. I have to treat him with respect. He's a dramatic critic."

Stranleigh turned to me again. "I am doubly honored," he said.

"I gather you and I are fellow patrons of the Repertory Theater."

"Yes, I go every week — one of the regular groundlings. I'm a particular admirer of Miss Craven's work." He pronounced admirer with undue emphasis on the first syllable, and I noticed that he spoke with quite a perceptible Manchester inflection, although there had been no trace of this in his playing of Prospero.

"You can't have been very impressed by our efforts," he continued. "They lacked what you might call polish, didn't they?"

"They did rather," said Jean candidly. She smiled at him and he smiled back.

"Well, at any rate I was very much interested in your own performance," I said. "I wish I could talk to you about it sometime."

"I wish you could," he replied. "But I'm afraid there's not much can be done about it now. Unfortunately, this is the first night and the last."

"Yes, but I'd like to talk to you about other performances. I don't think you ought to waste a talent like yours. May I ask what you do for a living at present?"

"I work in a dyestuffs factory."

"Oh, do you make colors?" said Jean.

"No, I write out figures. I'm a clerk. A very junior clerk."

At this moment, a short tubby young man with a chinless, rubicund face came hurrying towards us. "Congratulations, Charley lad," he said without noticing Jean or me. "That was gradely."

"Bill Sanderson," said Stranleigh solemnly. "Mr. William Sanderson. One of my most esteemed colleagues." He introduced Jean and me as representatives respectively of the professional stage and the Manchester press. Mr. Sanderson ejaculated: "Fancy that," and shook hands embarrassedly. He was overawed.

"Mr. Hunter has been kind enough to say I have talent," said Stranleigh.

"Nowt but what I've always told yer maself," said Mr. Sanderson, and then, turning to me, "He's a born actor, sir, is Charley. He ought to be on t' stage. . . . Not that Ah knows mooch abaht it," he added hastily.

"I think you're right," I said, "and I hope you'll continue to encourage him."

"Ah will, sir. Well — very pleased to have met yer — and you ma'am." He nodded awkwardly. "See you in t' morning, Charley lad." He moved off backwards, and disappeared in the crowd.

"Did he come specially to see you?" Jean asked Stranleigh.

"Yes. He's my greatest friend."

"Oh dear. I hope we didn't drive him away."

"I think, perhaps, he was a little nervous at meeting you, Miss Craven. He's one of your particular unseen admirers, like myself. We go to the theater together."

"I will watch out for you next time. What do you look like without white hair and a long beard?"

He took off the wig he was wearing and with a few sharp tugs pulled away the massive beard and whiskers. I had already seen that he was handsome; now I realized that he was much more than that. With features of near-perfect classical mould and a high forehead from which grew thick and rich dark hair, he might well have served a sculptor as a model for Psyche's lover. Yet there was nothing static or formalized about his appearance. His mouth and eyes were soft, sensitive and humorous in their mobility. I felt that he was conscious of his good looks just as I felt that his elaborate manner, belying his station in life, could not be natural to him. Nevertheless, as his man-

ner was charming, so his face was unspoiled by any trace of conceit or worldliness.

Jean looked at him with hardly concealed wonder.

"Now I shall be able to recognize *you*," she said.

"We mustn't keep Mr. Stranleigh any longer," I said. "He has to be up early in the morning, remember."

"Before dawn," said Stranleigh.

"How terrible. I don't think I could ever do that."

"To be honest, Miss Craven, I can't always do it myself."

"Can't you?" she laughed. "Can't you really?"

"Come, Jean," I said, edging away. "We really must be going."

She smiled sweetly, as she held out her hand to him. "Good-by," she said, "and thank you very much." He bowed over her hand, clasped mine firmly — and we took our leave. I had the feeling, as we went out of the hall, that he was still standing exactly where we had left him, gazing after us.

On the way back to town we were a silent pair. Jean was preoccupied, and I was planning the notice I must write. When we were within a short distance of her doorstep, she suddenly asked me, "Uncle Paul, what does 'gradely' mean?"

"It's a Lancashire word — meaning 'fine' or 'magnificent.' Did you think so, too?"

"What?"

"Think he was gradely?"

"Who?"

"You know who. Mr. Stranleigh."

"Oh, yes. I liked him very much."

"I mean what did you think of his performance?"

She did not answer me, for at this moment the cab came to a halt. I saw her to her door and we said good night. Then I drove to my office to announce to the world my discovery of an amateur actor in Blackley who might well go far on the professional stage.

CHAPTER II

ABOUT A WEEK after my notice appeared, I received a letter from Stranleigh himself. His literary style was even more affected than his conversation.

DEAR MR. HUNTER,

I was, needless to say, deeply flattered and gratified by your generous encomium of my humble effort. In consequence of it, I have recently received a communication which raises a problem for me and about which I would much appreciate the opportunity to consult you.

I am, sir, your obedient servant,

C. C. STRANLEIGH

I invited him to lunch with me at the Midland Hotel, but afterwards I realized that he probably could not take sufficient time off from his job to do this, and I was, therefore, surprised when he accepted by return of post. I asked Jean to help me out — and she agreed with alacrity.

We had already been waiting in the lounge for a full quarter of an hour when he came slowly towards us. At a glance, he looked like a fashionable poet or portrait painter or even, perhaps, a leading actor of the West End stage, but not like a junior clerk. His hair, though unusually long, was well groomed and he wore his neat black suit so stylishly that one did not notice at first how cheap and ill cut it was. He greeted us with an elaborate bow. He was profuse with apologies for being late.

"To be candid," he said, "I have never been inside this vast

hostelry before. I have been lost for the last twenty minutes in a labyrinth of passages and reception rooms."

"It's *you* I'm worried about," I said. "I'm afraid it was thoughtless of me to have asked you to come all this way in the first place, and now you'll have hardly any time left for luncheon."

"Oh, that's all right," he said. "My head clerk is very kindhearted and he's a patron of the drama, too. As a matter of fact, he was responsible for getting up *The Tempest*. He'll understand right enough if I'm not back on the stroke. I regret to say he's done so many times before now."

"Doesn't he have to report you if you're late?" Jean asked solicitously.

"No one can complain too much so long as the work gets done, and I must say I'm fortunate in my colleagues. They're highly co-operative." He emphasized the word "co-operative," meaning apparently that his colleagues were willing to do his work for him on occasion.

Stranleigh looked at the menu, and said, "I fear this means no more to me than a Greek lexicon" — a remark which obviously delighted Jean. It was clear that this was an entirely new experience for him. He allowed me to order for him. I suggested some wine, but he declined, explaining that he was a teetotaler. Throughout the meal he waited for my lead before using any cutlery. Yet he seemed at ease, and since I had the impression that he did it from desire to avoid embarrassing me rather than himself, I found the habit extremely engaging. Jean insisted that for sweet we should have *crème caramel*, and when Stranleigh tasted her favorite dish she asked, "Is that gradely, lad?" "Aye, lass," he answered, surprisingly, with a broad, almost caricatured Lancashire accent. "It's right gradely." And they both laughed, as at some private joke.

Not until coffee was served did he mention the matter that had brought about our meeting. "I wonder if you would mind casting your eye over this," he said and handed me a letter written on a single sheet of cheap, white notepaper. Neither Stranleigh nor Jean

spoke while I read the letter through. I was conscious of the noises in the restaurant — the soft, rich clinking of plates, the snatches of subdued conversation. Then I asked Stranleigh if he would allow me to read the letter aloud for Jean's benefit. This is what it said:

YOUNG SIR,

I, too, had the pleasure of witnessing your performance last evening which I observe is favorably reviewed in today's *Sentinel*. Though it is possible that you think less of the opinion of an old actor than of a prophet of the press, I want to tell you nevertheless that though you do indeed possess some genuine theatrical talent — a rare enough commodity, Heaven knows, in these "lean and withered" times — you still have everything to learn. So, if you are now contemplating the stage as a career, I beg you to refrain from taking any opportunity that may occur until you have undergone at least a modicum of training. To back this plea with a constructive suggestion, I am myself prepared to teach you. I realize you are probably not in a position to pay my fee, but I dare say we can come to some appropriate arrangement and if you wish to take advantage of this offer please call any time at your convenience on

Yours faithfully,

NORMAN GRANT

When I looked up, Jean's face was half hidden by the coffee cup which she held to her lips. There was an expression of guilty amusement in her eyes, and I imagined that my attempt to read the letter with appropriate feeling was responsible for this. Stranleigh gazed straight before him. He appeared curiously uninterested.

"Well," I said at last, "it seems an odd sort of letter. What is the advice you want from me?"

He hesitated. Then, with an appealing half-smile, he said, "I wondered if you would be kind enough to suggest how I should answer it."

"I see." I offered him a cigarette, which he refused, and then lit one for myself.

"It rather depends, doesn't it? This man may be a complete fraud. I've never heard of him, and I can hardly imagine he'd be living in Manchester if he were any good. Have you ever heard of an actor called Norman Grant, Jean?"

"No," she replied quickly, "but if he's very old, perhaps he's retired. He may have been famous once."

"That's possible, I suppose. At any rate," I said to Stranleigh, "why don't you call on him?"

"I wouldn't be a very good judge of his credentials. Besides I wouldn't like to offend him, whoever he is."

He regarded me with simple perplexity, and I began to feel something of the charm that apparently enabled him to ride roughshod over the strict rules of a Manchester business house. The secret of this charm, I supposed, was a gentle helplessness which contrasted so sharply with his extreme good looks and superficial assurance. He had come to me, a virtual stranger, for assistance in solving a problem which for most men would have been no problem at all. Curiously, I not only felt obliged to help him but knew I should derive pleasure from doing so.

"Well," I said, after appearing to reflect deeply, "I imagine the letter might never have been written but for my notice, so in a sense I'm responsible for it. How about my going to see Mr. Grant for you?"

"Oh, I should be most grateful to you if you would. But I don't want to put you to any trouble."

"It's no trouble. I assume that if I find out this fellow knows what he's talking about — and his terms aren't too stiff — you'd like to take lessons from him. That is — you're serious about going on the stage?"

For the first time, he seemed uncertain of himself. He looked at Jean, but she remained silent.

"I've always wanted to act," he said at last, "and I think I may claim without boasting that I have a gift for it. But —"

"Would your parents raise difficulties?"

"I have no parents."

"I'm sorry."

"My mother died five years ago. My father and I don't see eye to eye."

"Does your father live in Manchester?"

"He has a small farm near Altringham — about nine miles from here."

"You're not dependent on him in any way?"

"I haven't been since I grew up."

"What's the trouble then?"

"Well, of course, I've no doubt acting would be a much more agreeable way of earning a living than working, but —"

"Oh, don't imagine acting isn't work," I interrupted sententiously. "It can be very hard work indeed, as I'm sure Miss Craven will agree. Still, it's certainly more amusing than sitting in a stuffy office writing out figures. I don't imagine you want to do that for the rest of your life."

"No," he replied, and now in his slow, cautious deliberation he was the typical Lancastrian. "But a job's a job any road, as they say. I won't pretend I couldn't do with more money and leisure, but in a way I'm very fortunate, you understand. I haven't many worries, and I can do most of the things I like. Would it be the same if I went on the stage?"

"That's an impossible question to answer," I exclaimed. "If you were a success you'd obviously have much greater freedom to do as you like. Whether you *would* succeed is another matter. All I can say is that in my personal opinion you'd have an infinitely better chance than most."

"I understand," he said.

But it seemed to me that something was troubling him which he couldn't put into words. I beckoned to the waiter and asked for the bill. Then I said, "Look here, Stranleigh, if this fellow Norman Grant turns out to be genuine, you can presumably take lessons from him without committing yourself to going on the stage. I can't see you've got anything to worry about."

"That's right," he said, apparently grateful for the suggestion and in wholehearted agreement with it. "I shall be content to abide by any arrangement you make with Mr. Grant."

"Good. I'll try and see him this afternoon for you."

Jean said that she would have to be getting back to rehearsal, and we all three got up from the table. She and Stranleigh went into the lounge while I stayed behind to pay the bill. They were sitting talking together when I joined them. I told Jean I would accompany her to the Midland Hall. Stranleigh said good-by to us with many expressions of his thanks, and quite unhurriedly, although, according to my calculation, he had already been absent from his work more than two hours.

"Rum chap," I remarked to Jean as I strolled out with her. "One starts to think of him as an equal — and then —"

"You're a dreadful snob, Uncle Paul! It's not his fault he wasn't born rich."

"I know it isn't, and I don't care a hang about his birth. But isn't it curious? He has the manners of a gentleman, which presumably he's taught himself, and everything he needs to get on in life — and he seems half afraid to try."

"Perhaps he's not really interested."

"He's interested all right. Otherwise he certainly wouldn't have spent so much time talking to us. After all, if his head clerk suddenly decides to be tolerant no longer, he'll probably get dismissed on the spot."

"You don't think that will happen, do you?" she asked with alarm.

"No, I don't. But I wouldn't be altogether sorry if it did. It might be the best way of convincing him that the theater is his destiny."

"I suppose the theater is his destiny," she said without enthusiasm.

"I think he has a very great gift for it, don't you?"

"Oh yes," she replied with no more enthusiasm than before.

I looked up Norman Grant's name in the newspaper files and discovered that he had indeed been a well-known actor in his day. He

had been Irving's understudy at the Lyceum back in the 80's and later had headed a touring company that enjoyed considerable local popularity. About a decade ago, he must have left the stage, for the only mention of him I could find since then referred to some businessmen's dinner at which he had entertained the guests with a monologue.

When I met him, I found he was not living in affluent retirement. He occupied a small, dilapidated house in a street of dilapidated houses, not far from the church hall where *The Tempest* had been performed. He opened the door to me himself, so I surmised that he occupied it alone. He was shabbily dressed. The stiff white cuffs of his shirt were frayed, and his coat, worn and patched, did not match his sagging trousers. Yet he was not lacking in dignity. He was a tall man, and stood erect. His face was pale and lined but not debauched, and his hair, mostly gray, was still plentiful. I should have said he was about sixty years old, not more.

"Mr. Norman Grant?"

"Come in, sir, come in," he said without waiting for me to state my name or business. "I was about to take a dish of tea. Perhaps you would care to join me."

He led me into a box-shaped room that reminded me of a junk-shop, so full was it of objects neither decorative nor useful.

"Pray be seated. You take milk and sugar?"

My eye lighted on a sheathed sword standing in a corner next to a table that carried a dozen or more photographs in rather battered frames.

"Ha, ha," he said, as he handed me a cup of tea. "You are wondering what that is."

He picked it up triumphantly.

"Kean's sword. The one he used as Richard III. The one, as you may recollect, with which 'he drew lines in the sand.'"

He brandished it, struck a bellicose attitude and declaimed in full voice:

Fight, gentlemen of England! fight, bold yeomen!
Draw, archers, draw your arrows to the head!
Spur your proud horses hard, and ride in blood;
Amaze the welkin with your broken staves!

"Please observe," he said firmly, "that I did not drop my voice at the end of each line."

I was gaping at him, but he seemed unaware of my confusion.

"May I see the sword a moment?" I said at last.

"Of course, you may. Of course, you may."

I handled it reverently, but since I saw nothing to distinguish it from other property swords, I could think of no appropriate comment.

"Just *one* of the items in my little collection. Would you care to see some of the others?"

"Oh yes, I would indeed. But I've taken up too much of your time already and I —"

"Think nothing of it, my dear boy. For such a labor of love I have all the time in the world."

His collection seemed inexhaustible. I was shown a pair of buckles that once had been attached to Macklin's shoes, a snuff box used by Garrick, a kerchief that had brushed the eyes of Mrs. Siddons, a walking stick upon which Macready had leaned, handcuffs that had surrounded the delicate wrists of Madame Vestris, and I cannot remember what else besides. I was beginning to wonder whether there would ever be an end to it, when he suddenly noticed that my tea was still untasted.

"My dear boy, that must be stone cold. Let me give you a fresh cup."

"Oh, it's all right, thank you very much. As a matter of fact, I prefer it cool."

"Really? Then you are no true son of Manchester, I perceive. Here we like it strong and hot!" He took the opportunity to refill his own cup. "And now, shall we to business?"

"Yes," I said, and all at once felt foolish. "I don't think I've actually introduced myself, sir. My name is Paul Hunter."

"I thought it was Stranleigh."

"I'm not Stranleigh."

"You're not?"

"No," I said gently, not understanding how he could possibly have supposed I was.

He stared at me fixedly. "No," he said at last, "of course, you're not. Forgive me, but I have been expecting a young fellow named Stranleigh to call and, to be candid with you, I don't receive many visitors. May I ask what you want of me?"

I explained briefly.

"Ha, ha," he said. "So you are the enthusiastic prophet of the press. I suppose you have come to tell me that the young man has nothing to learn."

"Oh, no —"

"If you will permit me to say so, that is the impression you gave in your review."

"I thought his performance remarkably fine for an amateur. I don't pretend to have judged it from a professional standpoint. I should like to hear what you think his faults are —"

"You would? Well, I'll tell you. At the moment young Stranleigh cannot walk properly, he cannot use his voice properly and he cannot use his eyes or his hands or his arms to express anything at all. Those, my dear boy, are defects."

I smiled a little painfully, and put down my cup. "But they can be corrected?"

"Of course, they can — in time. That is precisely why I want to teach him. I tell you, laddie, I was never more thrilled in my life. I went to that abominable mutilation of the Bard with the greatest reluctance — at the insistence, to be honest with you, of my grocer, to whom regrettably I am under a continuing obligation. He wanted me to say an encouraging word to his daughter. I couldn't of course — truthfully. She was even worse than I had dreamed possible. But

young Stranleigh . . . he has — how shall I describe it? — a natural feeling, an inner spark that few of us possess, ever have possessed. A good actor never stops learning, you know. A good actor is a trained technician. But a great actor is a trained technician and something else besides, something that was born in him, something that can never be acquired. All the rest are bad actors. And, laddie, there are far, far too many of *them* in your modern age."

"Then you think my friend Stranleigh would be wise to go on the stage?"

"My dear boy, no one is wise to go on the stage. But provided he's willing to learn, I think it would be an incalculable loss if he didn't. Tell me, is he an abstemious young man?"

"I should imagine very. He's a teetotaler; and I don't believe he smokes either."

"Hm. You say that as if you thought success was dependent on total abstinence. It isn't, my boy. Not invariably. Look at me, for example. Still sound in mind and limb, but impoverished, retired, enforced retirement, my boy — and you know what the cause is?"

"No."

"Sobriety. Nothing but sobriety. I have been cold sober for eleven whole years, laddie, and for eleven whole years I haven't had a job worthy of the name."

He paused, tapping the tips of his fingers together. I realized he wanted to tell me more, and, after I'd murmured a word of encouragement, he proceeded to do so.

It was no story for a moralist, but I found it touching as well as bizarre. Once, he said, he had been "up there with the best of 'em." There had been Norman Grant Clubs among his admirers all over the country, and he had owned a town house and a country house and kept a mistress in Paris. In those days he was a heavy drinker; in fact, he was usually pretty drunk when he appeared on the stage. One night, when he was playing in Birmingham, he got a telegram saying that his wife, whom he'd left in London, was ill. He reached her bedside only an hour before she died.

She had always been a devoted wife to him, and for years he had hurt her with flagrant infidelities. Now his predominant feeling was remorse; and when she begged him, almost with her last breath, to promise her that he would stop drinking, he felt he owed her a chance to die more happily than she had lived. He took a vow never to touch alcohol again.

He kept it, though it meant the sacrifice of his career. Without the stimulus of alcohol he couldn't act. He had lost the will — or the nerve. His audiences began to desert him, and soon provincial theater managers were reluctant to book his tours. Finally, he was forced to give up. He sold his remaining possessions, and came to Manchester, where, since it was his native town, there had once been the largest and most enthusiastic Norman Grant Club of them all.

"I earn a few pence," he concluded, "lecturing to amateurs, reciting at public dinners. A pitiful end, you think? Well, as you see," and he waved his right hand imperiously, taking in in one sweep the sword and the signed photographs and all the other items of his collection, "I still live among the giants. I can hold my head up high."

There was a silence, while he seemed to be savoring his memories. Then he said, "But we forget young Stranleigh. What do you wish to tell me about him?"

I explained the position, pointing out that, though Stranleigh was definitely interested, he couldn't afford to leave his present job or pay more than a nominal fee for tuition.

"My dear boy, I don't want his money! I only mentioned the sordid word 'fee' in the first place because I wished him to be in no doubt he would be getting something of value. No, laddie, his success will be my reward. You need not repeat this — but I regard the prospect of training him as a great opportunity, because, if it turns out as I hope, I shall be able to feel that my own knowledge and experience have not been entirely wasted. Oh, please, don't look so alarmed, my boy. I have no intention of teaching your young friend to drink."

"I didn't think for a moment —"

"No? Well, in any case you may rest assured I shall endeavor to keep him on the path of strict abstinence."

"How much training will he need?" I said. "I mean how long before —"

He raised a hand to stop me. "I don't know. We shall have to see. Possibly he will master easily the tricks it took me years to learn. Anyway, you tell him I am at his service."

"I will certainly," I said as I rose to leave. "And thank you very much. I'm sure he'll be most grateful."

"Will he, do you think? Gratitude is not usually one of an actor's virtues, my boy. Wouldn't you care to see the rest of my collection?"

I glanced at my watch. "I'm afraid I have an appointment at 5:30."

"Ah well, I must not detain you then. Perhaps some other time — whenever you happen to be this way. Think of me, if you will, as a hermit. I seldom leave the house."

Back at the office, I dropped a note to Stranleigh advising him to get in touch with Norman Grant as soon as possible, and I also wrote a story for the morning edition which ended in fustian terms:

And so young Mr. Charles Stranleigh, the junior clerk, whose name may before long be known to millions of his fellow countrymen, embarks upon his theatrical tutelage under one of the most celebrated and admired of Manchester's native actors.

Two days later I received a letter from Norman Grant which read in part:

Young Stranleigh has been to see me. We have started work and I find him in earnest. Please do not take it amiss if I say that, while I am personally still vain enough to be flattered by the attention of the press, your friend has no need of notoriety as yet. Indeed, at the present stage, it is likely to be a distinct disservice to him.

CHAPTER III

MY ACQUAINTANCESHIP with Stranleigh gradually ripened into friendship. He called to thank me for having seen Norman Grant for him, and that meeting led to others. Within a month there was no formality left in our relationship. I was calling him Charley and he was calling me Paul, or quite often, when we were alone, Uncle Paul.

It took me some time to feel entirely comfortable about this. I was as class-conscious as any other young man of my conditioning, and it was hard for me to accept a junior clerk as an equal. Had there been anything in his manner to remind me, jarringly, of his inferior station, I should probably have fought shy of him. But there was not. He was as much a natural gentleman as he was a natural actor. Actually he could not be fitted into a social hierarchy of any kind.

Jasper Blake, I remember, rid me of my last snobbish reserves regarding him. Jasper was having a glass of sherry with me at Rusholme one evening, when Charley walked in unannounced. I felt a momentary pang of discomfort; but I need not have worried. Neither of them was embarrassed on being introduced, and soon the three of us were chatting together unconstrainedly. Blake was complaining about spending the winter in Manchester instead of in Switzerland. He asked Charley whether he also had to earn his own living. Charley replied that he worked for the Northern Dye-stuffs Company.

"So you're a slave of industry, too," said Blake. "Shake hands with a fellow sufferer. Public school and University men! I suppose we'll all come to it sooner or later — except Paul here — the lucky blighter. Do you hate your job as much as I do?"

"I could think of many more engrossing ways of spending my time," Charley said after a moment's earnest reflection.

"You express my own emotions perfectly," Blake laughed.

"Nice fellow," he said when Charley had left. "He ought to join our exiles' club. Where did you find him?"

I explained who Charley was.

"What? You don't mean to say he's the chap you wrote all that nonsense about? Well, I'll be damned. Anyway, I still think he ought to join the exiles' club. He's about the first reasonable human being I've met in this perishing city."

As a young man I grew tired of people quickly if I saw much of them, but I never wearied of Charley's company. I don't know why. He was no intellectual, and was not given to serious discussion. Though he seldom laughed himself, he was adept at making others laugh by sly observations that wore the cloak of gravity and were often made at his own expense. "We are engaged on the tragedy of *Hamlet*," he told me once when I asked him how his work with Norman Grant was progressing. "You cannot conceive the immensity of the effort I put into my recital of the 'To be or not to be' speech this evening. But the master was sadly unimpressed. He said, 'My dear boy, you don't need to be a great actor to do better than that. You only require normal intelligence.'"

He always referred to Norman Grant as the master, and obviously felt both respect and affection for him, but he also saw the comedy in him. Charley was a superb mimic. He could represent Norman Grant with all his peculiarities of speech. Before long I noticed that there were some things reminiscent of this imitation in Charley's own conversation. He was clearly impressionable, and I deduced that his whole manner, though not his personality, which remained triumphantly distinctive, was a compound of what he'd read or observed.

If he had any habit that I found distressing, it was a chronic unpunctuality. Not infrequently he would forget appointments entirely, and he was seldom less than half an hour late. But always

his apologies were so disarming and charmingly expressed that it was impossible to be angry with him. Instead, I became conscious of that helplessness in him which convinced me he should not be judged or treated as other men, but should, in some indefinable way, be protected from the world.

Perhaps the real reason he was never dull was that he was so unpredictable. I remember once he and Blake and I were dining together, and in the course of a perfectly amiable conversation Blake made some slighting remark about Lancashire. "I won't have that," Charley said suddenly. Thinking he was joking, Blake took no notice. "I won't have that," Charley repeated more loudly, and his tone and accent were now unmistakably those of an affronted Lancastrian. Blake looked as astonished as I felt, and hastily began to apologize. "That's all right," Charley said. "Perhaps I shouldn't have spoken. But to my way of thinking a man who'll listen to abuse of his own people is no better than a traitor."

Sometime after this episode he was elected, at my proposal, a member of the Racquets Club. You did not necessarily have to be a good racquets player to belong to the Racquets Club, but you did have to be socially acceptable. Charley's social acceptability was no longer surprising to me. I *was* surprised, though, that he soon proved himself sufficiently skilled at racquets to compete on equal terms with the best players in the club, one or two of whom were of championship class. I should never have guessed from looking at him or from anything he had ever told me that he was athletic. But then, before that scene with Blake I should never have guessed that there was a streak of jingoism in him or that he was capable, when aroused, of being aggressive.

What puzzled me most was his attitude towards his future. Though Norman Grant said he was proving a model pupil, I realized that he himself was still troubled by doubt and had not made up his mind to become an actor. At times he spoke with enthusiasm of his progress and of his hopes for an early debut. Just as often he would hint that he had no ambition to leave Manchester or his

present job. There was no use trying to make him explain this apparent contradiction, for he would only take refuge in vagueness. I found him both a reserved and an extraordinarily elusive man. Three months after our first meeting, I regarded him as a close friend. Yet I had to recognize that I understood him very little, and I was by no means certain that he understood himself.

Shortly before the Easter holidays he was promoted to some small administrative position in the Northern Dyestuffs Company, and his wage was raised to the formidable total of two pounds and ten shillings a week.

I well remember the occasion when he told me this news. We were lingering over a late meal at the Constitutional Club. The dining room was empty. I was enjoying a second glass of port, and he idly tilted back his chair. He had just finished one of his fanciful stories that, for all his solemnity, was not intended to be taken seriously. At first it seemed as if he were merely launched on another. He had, he said, made a staunch friend of a senior employee named Hugo Redfern who was paid a fat salary, even though he had no great industrial acumen. Redfern had mistaken Charley — to use the latter's own words — for "a prince in disguise" and had begun to confide in him. "Between you and me and the gatepost," he had said, "we two are the only gentlemen in the place." Redfern's duties consisted mainly of arranging the periodic luncheons and dinners given by the firm for its visiting dignitaries, and he had discovered in Charley a sympathetic listener. "It's the devil this job, Stranleigh," he had complained. "The managing director insists on variety — never the same dish twice. But, Heavens above, that's easier said than done — as he'd soon find out for himself if he tried." Then he had proceeded to ask Charley's advice, and had found this so helpful that he had straightway used his influence to secure Charley's promotion to a job where the latter would be more readily available for consultation on gastronomic problems!

How much truth there was in all this beyond the fact that Charley

had been promoted, through the good offices of Hugo Redfern, I could not tell. He recounted it in a detached, seriocomic sort of way, picturing himself as the unseeking beneficiary of fantastic chance. Yet, while it would be inaccurate to say that he was bursting with excitement — such a condition was quite alien to his manner — he was delighted with his good fortune and expected from me sincere congratulations. When I received his news in rather the same mocking spirit as he had imparted it, he was obviously displeased and became suddenly the downright Lancastrian.

"It may seem nowt to you," he said reprovingly, "but it's a big thing for me, understand."

"My dear fellow, don't mistake me; I'm as pleased as you are — naturally. You'll probably end up in the managing director's chair if you don't watch out."

"Oh, no," he said, at once regaining his good humor. "I fancy I've scaled my particular industrial pinnacle. Happen I won't need to remain an office worker above a few months longer — if the master's prognostications prove correct."

"That's just the point," I said eagerly. "I'm sorry if I was a bit of a wet blanket, but I honestly didn't imagine you'd be particularly interested in getting promotion now."

He seemed perplexed. "You think I ought to have refused it?"

"No, of course not. But is it really going to make such a difference to you?"

"Oh, aye," he said with the deepest conviction. "All the difference in the world."

He did not elaborate. The whole episode was typical of his contrariness, and was probably inexplicable. Or so I concluded at the time.

But I was wrong.

On the Thursday morning of Holy Week I found a letter at my office from Renee Logan, Jean's roommate. I was surprised, for I had met Renee Logan but once, and then very casually, when I

had encountered her with Jean. I remembered her as a tall, dark-haired girl, smartly if somewhat severely dressed, who seemed not so much pretty or beautiful as exceedingly handsome, with a glittering smile, which, incidentally, she used frequently on the stage. As soon as Jean introduced us, she monopolized the conversation and somehow conveyed the impression that she was doing me a favor thereby. It had struck me that her attitude towards Jean was that of a patronizing elder sister.

Her letter said that she wished to consult me on a matter concerning Jean's welfare and explained that only the urgency of the situation had persuaded her to approach me in this unconventional way. She warned me not to say a word about it to Jean. I had not seen Jean recently, but it seemed to me unlikely there could be anything seriously the matter. However my curiosity was aroused, and I left a note for Renee Logan at the Midland Hall stage door, inviting her to take tea with me in my Rusholme quarters next day.

She arrived promptly, entering my room with outstretched hand and a welcoming smile, as though she, not I, were in possession. She made me feel almost as young and callow as Jean made me feel old and worldly-wise.

I offered her tea after she had seated herself, without invitation, in my armchair *de luxe*.

"No, thank you," she said, "I never take it except as a social obligation and I'm sure you won't insist. I'd like a glass of that nice sherry, though," she added, pointing a leisurely finger at the sideboard.

I tried to accept her request nonchalantly and not show that I was shocked by it, but I must have done very poorly.

"To what do you attribute my barbarity?" she asked. "To the fact that I'm an American or to the fact that I'm an actress?"

I gaped at her.

"A little to both, I guess," she said and smiled her largest smile. I nearly spilled some of the sherry on her gown as I handed her the glass.

"You must forgive me," she said. "I couldn't resist it. You looked so stricken."

I went to help myself to some tea. She did not speak again until I was seated. I was finding the silence embarrassing when she began abruptly, "I understand Jean hasn't told you she's engaged to be married."

"No," I replied incredulously. "Of course, I haven't seen her in the last few days."

"She wouldn't have told you anyway. She's absurdly secretive. She probably wouldn't have told me if she could have avoided it. As you know, we've been sharing rooms since her mother left Manchester. On Monday night she suddenly announced she'd be moving out at the end of this week."

"You mean she's going to be married here?"

"That's what I understand *her* to mean."

"A week from tomorrow?"

"Exactly."

There was a pause. She was waiting for my next question.

"Who's she marrying?"

"Someone quite dreadful."

"Who?"

"A clerk in a dyeworks. She wouldn't tell me his name. Anyhow it doesn't matter."

I knew, of course, without being told. In retrospect, the signs at that first luncheon and at other meals we three had had together seemed so obvious that I wondered now how I could have failed to guess. Because I could not imagine myself in love with Jean, the possibility that anyone else might fall in love with her had just not occurred to me.

"Apparently they've been walking out together for months," my visitor continued. "I guess 'walking out' is the appropriate description. They'd have been married before this if he'd been willing to allow her to support him entirely. He, noble soul, wouldn't hear of that. Now he's got a better job or something. Anyhow sufficient

money to rent some cozy little suburban nook, where they can live happily ever after. Charming, isn't it?"

She got up and began walking about the room, pausing by the sideboard to help herself to a second glass of sherry. It was almost as if she hoped by this display of restlessness to quicken my indignation. "Well, what do you intend to do?" she asked.

"Do?" I replied, taken aback. "What can I do?"

"You surely don't intend to let this marriage take place. It would be suicidal."

I was puzzled, and rather hurt, that neither Charley nor Jean had confided in me. But, even though there might be little to recommend their marriage from the material point of view, I didn't see it was anyone's business to interfere; and certainly not mine. Yet I could not bring myself to say this. Instead, I pretended to be searching my mind for a solution.

"Don't you agree it would be suicidal?"

She was standing before me, looking tall and commanding. Though she spoke casually, with a touch of derision in her voice, the question was a challenge. There was tenseness in the atmosphere.

I felt sure now that she was here not so much to warn me as to seek assurance that I would act on her warning.

I wondered why she should be so concerned. Was it anxiety born of snobbery, because Jean intended to marry beneath her? That was what she wanted me to believe, but I could not accept it as the whole reason. Renee was an American, and Americans, I understood, lived without class distinction. Was it possible that she had as much faith in Jean's future on the stage as I had in Charley's, and was that why she disapproved of a marriage that would bind Jean to a man of no substance in a town of sparse opportunity? It did not seem likely. But what else?

At the moment, however, I was determined to avoid a scene. I set out to be conciliatory.

"I suppose you've done your best to dissuade her," I said, trying to sound businesslike.

"Yes, of course." She sat down again. "But Jean's an obstinate little thing, as you probably know. She wouldn't listen to reason."

"Do you think I'd have any better luck with her?"

"You're her cousin, my dear man. If necessary, you can get in touch with her mother."

"Jean hasn't told her mother, then?"

"Naturally not. She doesn't intend to."

"As a matter of fact, it might do more harm than good to bring Mrs. Craven into this. You see —"

"That's your affair." She got up, went to the sideboard and refilled her glass. Then she turned on me with a look of exasperation.

"I haven't been wasting my time, have I? You don't look like the sort of person who'd take the line of least resistance. Unless you're just not interested."

"Naturally I'm interested. I agree that the marriage should be postponed, and I shall do my best to see that it is. But I'm probably in a better position to judge from Jean's point of view than you are. You see, I happen to know the man."

"Indeed?" But her intensity had vanished. Apparently, she was satisfied.

"Yes. His name is Charles Stranleigh."

"Charles Stranleigh? What a big name for such a little man. Have you met him?"

"Many times. He's a friend of mine."

"We can't be thinking of the same person."

"Oh, yes, I'm certain we are — though it's obvious you've got an entirely false idea about him."

"I haven't any idea about him. Maybe he's the cleverest, wittiest, best-looking, most honest clerk in Manchester. It still wouldn't make him a less idiotic match for Jean."

"As a matter of fact I'm inclined to think that Jean's an idiotic match for Charley at the moment."

"Oh now, you're talking like a precocious undergraduate."

"It's a fact," I retorted, "that Charles Stranleigh has a big fu-

ture and if Jean marries him now she may interfere with it."

"How can he have a 'big future' in a dyeworks?"

"He's going into the theater."

"So he wants to be an actor! Well, that explains a lot. I suppose he figures if he marries Jean — how could she be so silly?"

"He happens to be remarkably talented."

"Really? It's surprising the number of amateurs who are 'remarkably talented' until they get up on a real stage."

"Charley's tutor wouldn't agree with you."

"No?" she said consolingly, evidently deciding the argument had gone far enough. "Well, maybe he's right. Anyway, so long as we're both determined he can't marry Jean, I don't think it matters much if we differ about the reason, do you?"

"I haven't said he shouldn't marry Jean — only that the marriage should be postponed."

"It amounts to the same thing. Given time, Jean will get over this infatuation."

"You wouldn't be so sure of that if you knew Charley," I remarked heavily. "I'd like you to meet him."

"Oh, that might be rather dangerous, don't you think? I mean if he's all you say he is, you'd quite likely find yourself having to stop *me* from marrying him."

She drained her glass of sherry. Then she smiled and held out her hand.

"I mustn't keep you any longer," she said, contriving to imply that she was extremely busy herself. "I am sorry to have brought you disturbing news. I did it out of friendship for Jean, as I'm sure you understand, but, strictly speaking, I have betrayed her confidence. Naturally I must ask you not to involve *me*."

"I'll certainly do my best not to. Of course, Jean may suspect."

"If so, it can't be helped. But there's no need to tell her — is there?" Then, with a last smile for remembrance, "Thank you for entertaining me so nicely."

In my efforts to pacify Renee I had produced a perfectly valid argument. Charley's variableness was no longer a mystery to me in the light of his engagement to Jean. I believed that if he married her at once, as he intended, he would never become an actor because he would not dare run the risk of failure. For this reason I decided to intervene.

I knew it would be pointless to discuss the matter with him. He would either evade the issue or become resentful. I must speak to Jean. Accordingly I asked her to spend Easter with me, explaining I wanted to have a long talk with her.

Easter was one of those rare days when the sun shines on Manchester, and, when the sun shines on Manchester, one's desire to be out of the place is sharpened. I suggested we take the train to Knutsford and have lunch at the old George Inn. She was delighted with the idea.

Seeing her perched on the edge of her corner seat in the train, looking out of the window, occasionally turning to speak to me, to make certain that I was sharing her appreciation of the beauty of the day, I was fonder of her than ever before. Carefree, innocent, unaware, she was like a child in love, believing in the future as a perpetuation of the idyllic present. I hated the thought of speaking to her of Charley, of being the spoil-sport who must force her to face reality.

We went to the Tudor dining room, with its minstrel's gallery, and ordered roast beef and Yorkshire pudding and apple pie with cheese, ginger beer for her and a pint of shandy-gaff for me. Then, when her chatter was exhausted and her thoughts seemed far off, I found the courage to speak.

"Jean," I asked abruptly, "why haven't you told me that you're going to marry Charley?"

Her face lit up. It was joyous. "How did you hear? I meant it to be a secret."

"A secret from me apparently. But not from anyone else."

"Oh, please, don't be cross. I would have told you, only I thought

it might put you in a difficult position. After all, my mother did ask you to look after me, didn't she? You won't tell her, will you? You must pretend you didn't know — "

"There's something I'd like you to tell me first. You remember that first luncheon the three of us had together at the Midland Hotel — you'd seen Charley alone before that, hadn't you?"

"Only once, I promise. Except the first time when you saw him, too. He and Bill came to the stage door on the Monday night after the performance. Bill's Mr. Sanderson. I expect you remember him. They were both very stiff and formal, dressed in their Sunday best, and they bowed from the waist when I appeared. I might have been the Queen. Bill was so small and round beside Charley. He did look so funny!"

"And then?"

"Oh nothing. They asked me if I'd go out with them and we went to a fish and chips shop. It was lovely."

"But why did you never tell me? Surely he didn't propose to you that night, did he?"

"No, but you see, he showed me the letter he'd just got from Mr. Grant. I said he'd much better ask your advice, but he thought you might be offended if you found out that he hadn't come to you in the first place. Dear Charley!" Gazing into space, at once visualizing him and savoring her love for him, she was radiant. "He hates to offend anyone."

"Bill's going to be our best man," she went on. "Oh, perhaps you'll be able to give me away now? Charley was going to ask someone in his office, an old man called Hugo Redfern. I'd much rather it was you. Will you give me away, Uncle Paul?"

I put down my fork. "One day, perhaps, I'd be proud to. But not yet. Jean," I said, facing her, "you may not like what I'm going to say, but I must. You've got to postpone this marriage."

She looked startled, hurt, as if she hated to believe such words were coming from someone she trusted.

"Why?" she asked quietly.

"Because — because it's impossible for the present. It will only lead to unhappiness."

She glanced away from me, and then quickly back. "Renee's been talking to you, hasn't she?"

"I hardly know Renee."

She ignored the denial.

"You mustn't take any notice of what she says, Uncle Paul. She's not really a nice person. Lately she's got almost as bad as my mother, expecting me to do exactly what she wants and saying how fond she is of me — a lot of gush. I hate it! What business is it of hers? I think she's jealous."

"Jealous?" I exclaimed, involuntarily betraying an interest in this possibility. "Why should she be?"

She laughed gleefully. "So it *was* Renee who told you."

"Well, even if it was, her opinions have nothing to do with what I think." I proceeded to explain my point of view. When I was done, she said, "I think you're right, Uncle Paul. I don't believe Charley will *want* to go on the stage after we're married. And I'll be glad."

This I was not prepared for. I recalled that at the outset she had shown little enthusiasm for Charley's acting ability. But it irritated, even angered me that she should blithely ignore as knowledgeable and experienced a judgment as Norman Grant's.

"Do you mean to say you've been discouraging Charley? Don't you understand —"

"I haven't discouraged him. I haven't encouraged him, either. Charley's a free person. No one should try to influence him. I shall always let him do exactly what he wants, because I trust him, Uncle Paul, I believe in him, as he is now. I know what he likes without being told and I think he knows what I like. He hasn't asked me to give up being an actress — but I shall do so as soon as I can."

"Do you mean to tell me you're going to marry him knowing quite

well what will happen and for the deliberate purpose of preventing —" I had raised my voice.

"No, Uncle Paul," she interrupted, unruffled. "I'm going to marry him because he's asked me to and because I love him."

"Jean," I began again patiently, "even if you sincerely believe Charley would be a failure as an actor —"

"I don't believe that, Uncle Paul. He might be a great success, and if that was what he wanted, really and truly wanted, he should try for it. But it isn't, Uncle Paul. I'm sure it isn't. If it was, he wouldn't be Charley any more. Oh, I know he loves to act — and he enjoys learning from Mr. Grant — and, of course, when he was Prospero — but that was different — different, I mean, from being a professional. He'd never be happy on the stage, however rich and famous he became. He couldn't be, because —"

"Oh now, you're talking tommyrot," I exclaimed.

But she was convinced that a successful stage career would destroy Charley. She gave me her reasons fitfully, disjointedly, interspersed with tales of the things she and Charley had done together and loved doing together — how, in particular, they had taken a day's trip to Blackpool and ridden the merry-go-rounds and had their fortunes told. Time and again she repeated the word "free" — Charley was a "free" person. Would he not be much more free on the stage? I asked. . . . No, no, no; because to become a successful actor he would have to barter his independence of spirit.

Then did she not realize, I asked, that the life he liked to lead as she had described it — enjoying the fun of Blackpool and so on — was simply a sign of passing youthfulness? No, on the contrary, it was expressive of something fundamental in him — the something, for it was in her too, that had made their coming together both miraculous and inevitable. It was a transcendence of all worldliness, a faith in a kind of private fairyland. Would *she* retain it in any circumstances — even if she should become famous? Oh, yes. Then, why shouldn't he also? Was she suggesting that she was strong where he was weak? No, he was not weak, but unseeing. The lovely thing

that made him her Charley could never really die. But by hostile influences, of which he was unaware, it might be imprisoned. "Oh, Uncle Paul, how blind you are."

I told her she was condemning Charley to a life of frustration and that the suppression of a talent so bright as his would be unforgivable. My arguments availed nothing against her belief that she and Charley were one kind of person and I and all the rest of the world quite another.

We caught a late-afternoon train back to the city. We had a carriage to ourselves, and could have continued our argument. But every point I could think of making I had already made more than once. The discussion had only added to my conviction that I was right, and I no longer felt pity or sympathy for her, but resentment. I sat in disgruntled silence, while Jean, more puzzled than offended, did not attempt to break in upon my mood.

By the time we reached Manchester it was dark. Still silent, we started walking down the platform towards the ticket barrier. Suddenly, I realized that in a little while she would be gone from me. I had to make a last effort to bring her to her senses.

"Whatever you may say, I know the real reason why you don't want Charley to go on the stage."

"What, Uncle Paul?" she said pleasantly.

"It's because you haven't enough confidence in him, or in yourself, perhaps. You're frightened of losing him. You want to keep him shut up in a nice little box so that you can be certain of having him all to yourself."

As soon as the words were spoken, I knew they had found their mark. She stopped, and looked up at me with eyes at once frightened and pleading.

"You don't really think that?"

Pitilessly I seized my advantage.

"Of course, I do. You're being selfish. In the end, you won't do yourself any good, even though you wreck Charley's whole life."

It was clear what I had done. I had forced her to realize that her

belief that Charley would not be happy as an actor might be born of possessiveness. In the face of this possibility, she could no longer trust her instincts. Neither her pride nor her essential goodness would allow her to. Now, whether I was right or wrong, she would have to give in to me.

All at once I was deeply sorry for her. "Jean," I said, "I'm only asking you to postpone your marriage. Probably not for very long. Only long enough to give Charley a chance to get started on the stage."

She did not answer me but kept her eyes straight before her. I felt she was striving hard to keep back the tears. When we came out of the station, I started to hail a cab, but she shook her head, and we walked on. As her tram approached, she suddenly turned and faced me.

"Uncle Paul," she said, and there was an agony of earnestness in her voice, "are you quite, quite sure Charley could be a great actor? Please, Uncle Paul, I want the truth."

"Yes," I replied hastily, wishing no further argument. "I *am* sure. And it's not only my opinion —"

"Very well, then. I'll do as you think I should. I'll tell him we can't be married yet."

The tram had come to a halt. She got on it without saying good-by and without looking back.

I sauntered off, feeling far from jubilant. I had acted under compulsion, but I wished it had not been necessary to use so cruel a means to convince her. I hated to think of her weeping now, when she had started the day so joyfully. Yet I had no doubt that she would quickly get over her disappointment, and sooner or later would be grateful to me for having shown her the way to a far happier future with Charley than would have been possible had I held my tongue.

For I did not understand then, even remotely, the real cause of her suffering and her tears or how deep they went. I thought they were merely superficial. I did not realize they were prophetic.

CHAPTER IV

WHEN I SAW Charley a day or two afterwards, he told me, in the indirect way characteristic of him, that he was aware I knew of the engagement, and that he and Jean had decided to postpone the marriage until his future as an actor seemed secure.

Apropos of nothing in particular, he announced that he would shortly be leaving the Northern Dyestuffs Company. Norman Grant, he explained, had agreed to introduce him to Sir Gerald Willard, the celebrated actor-manager, who was bringing his Shakespearean company to Manchester at the beginning of May.

"I hope something comes of it," I said.

"Oh, it will," he said, and added mischievously, "I'm not sure the master quite approves. He'd prefer me to wait until the autumn, but I can't afford to hang round much longer. The sooner I get started, the sooner I'll be able to marry."

That was all: a single sentence to explain everything he considered necessary. I offered him my congratulations, which he accepted with a silent bow. Obviously he wanted no discussion of the matter.

On the following Friday, I invited them both to have lunch with me at Sinclair's, intending this as my celebration of their engagement. It went off well. Jean greeted me with unaffected cheerfulness and cordiality, and I was satisfied that she had recovered from the hurt I had caused her.

We sat at one of the clothless, scrubbed wood tables in the oak-beamed dining room, and devoured two dozen oysters each. I drank a pint of black velvet, which Charley and Jean both thought an in-

credible feat — as incredible a feat as drinking a pint of medicine. Charley talked about his forthcoming meeting with Sir Gerald Willard. While he did so, Jean's face wore an expression of indulgent pride.

After Charley had gone, she asked me to tell her exactly what Renee had said about him.

"No, Jean." I said. "I'm not going to make mischief between you two. After all, you're sharing rooms —"

"We're not. I'm living on my own now."

"You mean you've quarreled with Renee?"

"I wouldn't stoop to quarreling with her. I'd already told her I was going to move, and I did — that's all — though she was very cross about it."

"It's your business, of course. But I'm not sure you've been quite fair. She thought she was acting in your best interests when she came to see me."

"I suppose she told you Charley wasn't good enough for me."

"Well, after all, she didn't know anything about him. She thought you wanted to marry just an ordinary clerk."

"Even if he was just an ordinary clerk, he'd still be Charley, wouldn't he?" Then her mood changed. "She's going to be surprised, isn't she, Uncle Paul?"

"Yes," I said feelingly. "I'm sure she's going to be very surprised."

During the next few weeks I saw Jean and Charley together often, and I could not doubt that they were deeply in love. They were not particularly demonstrative, but it seemed that they had an understanding of each other which was almost psychic.

Yet for me their personalities were by no means merged. When the three of us were together, Jean's manner was natural and spontaneous. She made it clear that they had in common an attitude towards life which was exclusively their own. He, on the other hand, seemed determined to keep the Charley I knew and the Charley Jean knew quite separate. When I tried to visualize them by themselves, though I was able to form a reasonably clear picture of her, I could

see him only as the reflection of an idea dimly comprehended.

It was plain that she had come to appreciate life in a new way and that if she were to lose him she would feel condemned to an existence spiritually paralyzed. But he, it seemed to me, though he loved her, could still find happiness without her and did not need her, as she needed him, to give him purpose and joy in living.

Yet Charley was greatly under her influence. All he had needed apparently to convince him that he would do right to become an actor was for her to say so, and now that she had done this he accepted the fact that his future was in the theater without question. His former hesitancy about throwing up a good job had vanished. He had developed a sublime confidence in himself and in his star. He did not think about setbacks and disappointments, but blithely counted the days that separated him from the beginning of his stage career as he might have the remaining days of a prison sentence.

He was certain Sir Gerald would offer him a job, and his whole attitude was serene, happy-go-lucky, and by all worldly tenets basically irresponsible. It was as if he had been moving haltingly in a fog, and when the fog lifted he saw before him a straight road, at the end of which lay his rich destiny. His assurance seemed to be born, not of thick-skinned conceit, nor of a deep-rooted determination to succeed, but rather of a child's faith in his own deserts and in natural justice. I knew that this was the most perishable kind of faith, and I was afraid that if he remained too reliant on it, he might be disillusioned before he had allowed himself a fair chance.

Jean, I thought, ought to warn him that, for all his natural gifts, things would be unlikely to prove as easy for him as he now supposed. Only she could tell him this and make him believe it.

But she didn't do so, and, even if I had been inclined to interfere again, it would have been pointless urging her to. I could not tell whether she had got over her original fears or whether, secretly, she still dreaded his future on the stage. But of one thing I felt sure. She was no less convinced than he of the inevitability of his success.

Charley's appointment with Sir Gerald Willard was on a Saturday morning in the first week of May. He was to go for a private audition to the theater. That day I had lunch at the Racquets Club, and afterwards wandered into the reading room.

I had dozed off over the *Manchester Guardian*, when I was awakened by a familiar voice. "Ah, Uncle Paul!"

Charley was standing behind me. He looked graver than usual, but I knew him well enough by now not to draw any conclusions from this.

"Well, how did it go?" I asked, pulling myself upright.

He sat down beside me. Then he said ponderously, "I'm glad to find you here. I wonder if you'd be kind enough to read this through."

I glanced briefly at the sheet of notepaper he handed me, and saw that it was a letter, giving his notice to the Northern Dyestuffs Company.

"So you really have got a job out of Willard," I exclaimed with frank surprise. I hadn't supposed he would get a stage job of any kind at the very first try.

He smiled. "Well, the terms aren't actually settled," he said equably. "But I have no doubt they will be." He became earnest again. "Do you think the letter's all right?"

"First tell me all about the job. Do you know what sort of parts he's going to let you play?"

"I really ought to get the letter off as soon as possible."

"Oh, very well," I said impatiently.

It was a unique document of its kind, pure Charley. This is what I read:

To the Chairman of the Northern Dyestuffs Company
SIR,

I beg to submit my resignation: this to become operative, in accordance with the rules and customs of clerical employment, at the end of the coming week. It is with great regret, and with the deepest consciousness of the obligation I owe you, sir, that I take this step, but I have been offered an opening elsewhere

which neither prudence nor ambition permits me to refuse. I have made many fine friends in the Northern Dyestuffs Company, whose kindness I shall never forget, and it has been a privilege to work under your hidden but beneficent command. Believe me, sir, if my services have been found a fraction as satisfactory as I have found the consideration always shown me by my colleagues and superiors alike, this will be for me a source of eternal pride.

I have the honor to remain, sir,

Your humble and most obedient servant,

C. C. STRANLEIGH

"Well?" He was watching me anxiously, and I felt convinced that, whether or not he realized it was an extraordinary way for a junior employee to give notice, he fully intended to send the letter and wished me to judge it on its merits.

Charley's literary style, I decided, defied editing. There was no way of modifying his letter without destroying its individual flavor. "Well, Charley," I said, "it strikes me as admirable. The chairman ought to be delighted with it."

He beamed. "Thank you. That's a great relief. You know," he said, as he took the letter from me and started putting it in its envelope, "I sat up half the night writing it."

"You mean to say you wrote it before you'd even seen Willard?" I was incredulous.

"No harm in that. The trouble was, though, I overslept this morning."

"Surely you weren't late for your appointment?"

"I'm afraid I was — very late." He waved my exclamations aside. "Oh, I realize the result might have been most unfortunate, but Sir Gerald hadn't left the theater when I arrived, and though he seemed a little put out at first, he calmed down after I'd offered my apologies. He invited me to come back again after the matinee."

"You were lucky he consented to see you at all in the circumstances."

"Yes, I suppose I was."

I watched him calmly licking down the flap of the envelope.

"Aren't you taking a lot for granted? If I were you, I'd wait until you've seen Willard again before sending that letter."

"Oh, I'm not seeing him again today."

"But I thought —"

"I can't go back after the matinee."

"Why on earth not?"

"Because I have a previous engagement. I told him so."

"My dear Charley," I exclaimed, involuntarily jumping to my feet, "you must be mad."

"What else could I do?" he said placidly.

I began striding around the room. "Don't you see the point? You can't expect a busy and important man like Willard to bother his head about your private engagements. You ought to consider it a great favor that he's agreed to give you a hearing at all. Can't you see that?"

He looked merely puzzled. "Sir Gerald understood right enough," he said, "when I explained what the engagement was. As a matter of fact, he said he wouldn't want me to break it, and he wished he could be in my place."

"What place?"

"You oughtn't to have to ask me that, Uncle Paul." He sounded pained by my ignorance. "The club tournament's on. I'm playing in the semifinals at six o'clock. Naturally I wasn't going to scratch."

"That is what you told Willard?" I was beginning to see daylight, for I remembered having heard that Sir Gerald cherished a pet theory that physical training should be a part of every actor's schooling.

"Aye," he said, at last betraying some excitement, "and he seemed delighted to hear it. He used to play racquets quite a bit himself at one time, and he's still a real enthusiast. We got talking about the game, and it's a funny thing, you know, but he might just as well have given me an audition after all, because I was with him at least

half an hour. Before I left, he asked me whether I'd fancy working as his secretary. At first I couldn't see what a job like that would have to do with acting, but he explained I'd have a chance to play small parts and understudy. I consulted the master afterwards, and he advises me to accept. He says I couldn't hope for a better opportunity to gain experience. He thinks I'm very fortunate."

"Charley," I said as I resumed my seat, "you're incorrigible."

I gave the story to my paper, and it appeared on Tuesday. Charles Stranleigh, the gifted young Manchester actor, who had been discovered originally by the *Daily Sentinel*, and who for the past several months had been studying under Norman Grant, was to make his professional debut as a member of Sir Gerald Willard's company. He had also been appointed Sir Gerald's personal secretary. He was to join the company at the end of the week, when it would be leaving Manchester to fulfill a fortnight's engagement in Leeds, and was to be with it during the remainder of its current tour.

He was to be paid (although this was not reported) an initial salary of three pounds per week. "On the master's advice," he had told me, "I asked for four pounds. 'That's exactly what I think you're worth to me, Charley,' Sir Gerald said, 'so I'm giving you three.' It's not a princely salary, not enough for a married man to live on. But the prospects are good any road. It won't be long before I'm earning much more."

Jean also believed this. She was not happy about their imminent separation, but she seemed resigned. I called for her at the Midland Hall after the rehearsal on Tuesday afternoon, and we went back to her rooms, where I sat with her while she had her early evening meal before the performance.

I wanted to consult her about a little farewell luncheon I planned to give for Charley. We decided it had better be held on Friday, for on Saturday she had a matinee and he was due to leave on Sunday morning, and then we discussed who should be invited. Norman Grant, of course, and Blake, and one or two particular friends of

Charley's at the Racquets Club. Bill Sanderson, she suggested, and why not Hugo Redfern? When our list was complete, it occurred to me that she would be the only lady present. I pointed this out, and asked her whether she minded.

She put down her knife and fork, and stared straight before her. At length she turned to me, with a curious expression, a challenging expression in which there was a hint of bravado.

"Why don't you invite Renee?" she said.

The idea had crossed my mind, and I wondered if she had read my thoughts.

"Oh, no," I said with pretended horror, "she's the last person I'd think of."

"You'd like her to come, wouldn't you?"

I didn't answer immediately. "Wouldn't you?" she repeated.

"Only to show her how wrong she was about Charley. You see," I continued truthfully, "she was sarcastic when I suggested she might like to meet him one day. I'd like to watch her face when she finds out the truth. On the other hand, she'd be quite out of place, and she might ruin everything."

"Oh, you needn't worry about that."

"Well, it's for you to decide, Jean. If you really want me to invite her —"

"I do."

She got up from the table.

"All right then," I said. "But I won't tell her it's a farewell party for Charley. I'll let her discover that for herself."

She was standing now before a mirror that was hung above the mantelpiece, putting on her hat. She turned round, and there was a look of distant sadness in her eyes such as I had never seen there before. For several seconds she stood where she was, as though she had lost consciousness of her surroundings. Then she moved past me to the door. "I ought to be getting back, Uncle Paul."

The more I thought about it, the less I understood what reason she could have for suggesting I invite Renee. However, I wrote to Renee

that night, simply mentioning that I was giving a small luncheon party in a private room at the Midland Hotel. The reply revealed why Jean had been so unenthusiastic about my idea of "showing" Renee. She must have foreseen that her former roommate was not going to be as easily gulled as I imagined. But it did not explain why she had suggested that I invite her. On the contrary, it made that still more puzzling.

Renee Logan wrote a courteous letter of acceptance that carried, nevertheless, a vaguely contemptuous ring. It ended with the sentence: "Dare I hope to see the admirable Stranleigh among your guests?"

And when she walked into the private room at the Midland Hotel, she gave no hint that she had been previously unaware of the purpose of the luncheon or was in the least taken aback to find out now. She arrived late, several minutes after the rest of the party was assembled, and made her entrance with conspicuous self-assurance. She waved a casual hand to Jean, and then said to me, though I had barely had opportunity to greet her, "I'm afraid you'll have to introduce me to all these nice people. I don't know any of them except Jean." Thus, as at our first meeting, she succeeded in embarrassing me. Her air was one of faintly unbending graciousness as she shook hands with my other guests, but when I introduced Charley to her she became almost submissive. "It's a very great pleasure to meet you," she said, with one of her most glittering smiles. "I've heard so much about you."

"Not nearly so much as I've heard about you, Miss Logan," he said, bowing over her hand. "I'm one of your particular unseen admirers."

"How sweet," she said, amused and apparently delighted. I realized that Charley had made almost exactly the same remark to Jean at their first meeting.

As guest of honor, he sat on my right at luncheon, with Renee next to him and Jean opposite. Renee set out to monopolize his attention. Flattery was the method she used, calculated and not very subtle

flattery. How she envied him! As Sir Gerald Willard's secretary, she said, he would be a most important man in the theater. Hardly an actor or actress in London would be above seeking his patronage. Had Sir Gerald confided to him his plans for the autumn? She would like to know, because there was nothing she herself wanted more than to be a member of Sir Gerald's company. He must not be surprised to receive a begging letter from her one fine day. Was his ambition to act or manage or produce? All three, perhaps? Well, she thought he stood an excellent chance of stepping into Sir Gerald's shoes eventually.

I was surprised, and a little shocked, to see how easily and pleasantly he responded to her. He kept up his side of the conversation with his customary courtesy and reserve, but his eyes shone and his cheeks were a trifle flushed.

He could not know that her interest in him was mere pretense, that she was using him as a pawn in a game she had decided to play, and was demonstrably winning, against Jean and myself. I bitterly regretted having invited her. It was unfair to Charley, and unfair to Jean also, who was watching anxiously, unhappy to see him being made a fool of by such obvious means.

It was a simple summer luncheon: cold consommé, lobster salad and early strawberries and cream. There was Rhine wine to drink, of which everyone partook except Charley and Norman Grant, the two total abstainers. After coffee had been served Hugo Redfern — a thin, melancholy-looking man, with a parchmentlike face and grizzled hair — left his place and came to whisper something in my ear. We held a brief conference.

A minute or two later, I rose and said, "Ladies and gentlemen — The King." We drank the Royal Toast — "The King — God Bless him" — and, when the others were seated again, I remained standing. "I call on Mr. Hugo Redfern," I said.

Hugo Redfern rose, and cleared his throat. He spoke in a parched, crackly voice.

"It's not for me," he said, "to propose our friend Stranleigh's

health, though I should feel honored to do so. [*Hear, hear!*] I know I'm going to miss him a great deal, but I've always thought he was wasted in industry — industry and the artistic temperament don't necessarily go together [*laughter*] and I wish him all the very best of luck in his new profession [*applause*] or should I say *the* profession? [*Laughter and applause.*] I should also like to take this opportunity to thank our host for his excellent hospitality. [*Hear, hear.*] I understand Stranleigh's colleagues intend to pay him tribute in their own fashion tomorrow. [*Cries of "What fashion?"*] That's their secret. But the Chairman has given me a message which he has asked me to deliver to Stranleigh on this occasion. The message reads: 'We of the Northern Dyestuffs Company will be watching your career with pride and interest.' [*Applause.*] And now I have the pleasure to call on the man to whom belongs the privilege of proposing the health of the guest of honor. Mr. Norman Grant. . . ."
[*Loud applause.*]

Norman Grant got to his feet. He took a few sips from a glass of water, while everyone looked up expectantly. He was a pathetic, almost a tragic figure, it struck me, this reformed drunkard, this actor who could no longer act, this teacher who by a chance discovery of a pupil had found new hope of self-fulfillment. He stood at the foot of the table, very upright, in a frock coat brought out of moth balls for the occasion.

There were tears in his eyes as he began to speak, and more than once his voice quavered and broke. "Acting," he said, "is not a tangible thing. It has no substance of its own like literature or music or painting. Were it not for living actors, it would become extinct, unknown, unimaginable. It is a tradition. It is a torch carried by the great players of every age, and passed on from them to their successors. Irving carried that torch, and I fear, ladies and gentlemen, that when he died no one was worthy to take it from him. He set it down. But I hope — I believe — that in the fullness of time, in the richness of his promise, this dear boy, Charles Stranleigh, who today is on the threshold of his career, will pick up the torch again and will

carry it forward gloriously. God bless him. God bless you all."

There was silence, as he sat down. He bowed his head, and then, spontaneously, Blake gave him a gentle, congratulatory slap on the back. He looked up and smiled, a little shamefacedly. "Thank you, laddie," he said. He remembered at last to propose Charley's health, and we drank it.

"Charley! Charley!" the cries broke out. I do not know whether he was prepared for what he had to do, but I can say that he had a natural gift for impromptu speaking. Now he rose without protest or ado. The applause died down, and without shifting his stance, but with his beautiful face suddenly alive with gentleness, he began: "Ladies and gentlemen, I shall never forget this day. I shall never forget Paul's hospitality nor the friendship he and all of you have shown me. I shall try to be worthy of it. I shall never cease to be grateful for it."

He paused, and looked towards Norman Grant, with a smile of pure affection in his eyes and on his lips. "If I fail," he went on, "the fault will be mine. If I succeed, the credit will belong to the man who has just spoken. I call him now the master. I shall always call him so in my heart."

We applauded, but I could not see Norman Grant's face, for again he had lowered his head.

"In responding to the toast the master proposed," Charley resumed, "I should like, with all humility, to give you an example of his teaching which I consider appropriate to this occasion."

He stepped back a pace or two, and then without any other perceptible indication that he was embarking on a performance, glided, as it were, into the "All the world's a stage" speech from *As You Like It*. Realizing he was in a small room among a group of friends, he was content to recite it clearly and simply, yet musically, too, with understanding and relish of the poetry. His voice had the same enchanting timbre as when I had first heard it, but I perceived that it was much better controlled than it had been then, with more light and shade in it.

I watched Renee. The look of amused tolerance on her face soon changed to one of frank surprise and then to one of admiration. Yet, when he sat down, she did not join in the clappings and bravos and shouted congratulations. She said nothing at all. As soon as the clamor had ceased, she turned her back to him and started talking to Hugo Redfern. Charley was rather obviously put out.

When Renee got up to leave, she thanked me warmly, but she bade Charley a very offhand farewell. Norman Grant said, "I expect you this evening, as usual, my boy. Don't forget." We all expected to see Charley again before his departure on Sunday, so there were no formal good-bys.

He and Jean stayed behind after the others had gone. Charley had regained something of his normal composure, but I could tell he was still upset; Jean was subdued.

"Your recitation was a great success, Charley," I said, in a deliberate attempt to soothe his feelings.

"Was it?" he burst out. "Jean's friend, Miss what's-her-name, didn't seem to think so." I had never heard him speak so petulantly before.

"As a matter of fact, Charley, you're wrong. I was watching her carefully, and I haven't a doubt she was impressed."

"She said nowt." He was speaking dialect in his indignation. "I don't understand it. She was so friendly at t' beginning. Why should she turn so cold suddenly?"

"Do you care?" Jean asked unexpectedly, almost explosively. There was suppressed yet turbulent anger in her voice.

He glanced at her lovingly before replying. Then he said slowly, "No, but still, she was one of Uncle Paul's guests, you know. I wouldn't want to think I'd offended her."

Jean and I both laughed at this. Charley joined in, a little sheepishly. The incident was over—for good, I thought. But Charley would not forget Renee, the handsome and brilliant girl who one moment had made much of him and the next had ignored him.

Charley was to join the company at the station. The train for Leeds was due to leave at 10:30 A.M., and the "call," as the theatrical vernacular has it, was for 10:00 A.M.

At 9:30 I called for Jean. It was a dull, drizzly morning, and because it was Sunday the streets were nearly deserted. An occasional tram passed; otherwise the only sound of traffic came from the clop, clop and clatter, clatter of our cab. Jean looked pale and downcast. Instead of excitement and adventure, I felt loneliness and doom in the atmosphere as our cab drove on inexorably towards the station.

"Cheer up, Jean," I said at last.

"I'm all right, Uncle Paul."

"This had to come, you know. You couldn't have stopped it. It would have been wrong of you to try. When Charley's an established actor and you're married to him, you'll look back on this morning and wonder why you were so upset. In your heart of hearts, you know that's true, don't you?"

For answer, she opened the loosely wrapped parcel that she had been clutching under her arm. She handed me a volume of Shakespeare's collected works. The book was handsomely bound in leather, and I guessed had been fairly expensive.

"I'm giving him that," she said. "You can read what I've written inside if you like."

I read her inscription on the flyleaf: *To my beloved Charley, to wish him well in his career, from Jean.* Her eyes met mine. They were looking at me steadily. I can never forget the proud and pathetic dignity of that look.

"You see," she said. It was her formal capitulation.

"Yes," I said, feeling uncomfortable. "And in a sense it's your career as well as his. What he's doing is as much for your sake as his own."

She didn't reply. She took the book from me, and replaced it in its wrapping. We drove the rest of the way in silence.

As we started up the platform, we saw Charley walking along a few yards ahead of us. He was carrying a bulging, cloth-covered

green suitcase. He was wearing his best suit and a bowler hat. His overcoat was slung across his shoulder. Jean called to him. He put down the suitcase, turned round and swept off his bowler in an elaborate greeting.

Then he took both Jean's hands in his.

"Oh, my dearest, I'm so glad to see you," he said.

"Did you think I wasn't coming?"

"I was worried you might be late."

"Me late? Do you hear that, Uncle Paul? If you knew how often and how hard I've tried to keep him waiting! I've never succeeded yet."

"I can well believe it," I laughed.

"What would you have done if I hadn't arrived in time?" she asked him. "Would you have gone without saying good-by?"

"No, I'd have stayed behind."

"Then I wish I'd overslept."

She said this firmly yet cheerfully. Now that she was with him, all traces of her depression had gone.

"Where's Bill?" she asked.

"I said good-by to him outside."

"Oh?"

"I didn't want anyone seeing me off but you. And Uncle Paul, of course," he added hastily.

"Well, let me act as porter," I said, picking up his suitcase. "You go ahead with Jean."

They did so, arm in arm, Charley inclining his head towards hers.

I easily recognized Sir Gerald's company. The exigencies of the stage rob most players of their individuality and transform them into mere types. Here were many of the types invariably found in a large theatrical troupe: the disappointed, humble old actor, who, though past sixty, had never risen above playing small parts and was lucky to be doing so still, shorn of the courage to voice ambition, superficially grateful just to be "in work"; the flashy young actor, flamboyantly dressed, using stage slang glibly, but as yet undarkened

by disillusionment and unillumined by real experience; the portly and comfortably middle-aged actress who, though she had abandoned the quest for stardom, was sure she "knew her job" and was ready if need be to fight for her rights.

Sir Gerald himself was a well-preserved man in his fifty-sixth year. His features were still essentially handsome, and he had a remarkably youthful figure. Time had not treated his leading lady, who was also his wife, nearly so well. In her young days she had been conventionally pretty, but now she was dumpy, and her heavily-lined face looked grotesque under the dyed yellow hair.

A row of compartments was reserved for the company at the very front of the train: a first-class compartment for Sir Gerald and Lady Willard and the podgy, harassed-looking business manager; a second-class compartment for the lesser principals; and three third-class compartments for the remainder of the company.

Most of the company, including Sir Gerald himself, were wandering about the platform.

"Well, well, young fellow-my-lad," said Sir Gerald as Charley approached, "so you've arrived. And only five minutes late, I observe. We'll teach you theater discipline yet."

"You see, Sir Gerald," Charley replied, showing him a large silver pocket watch, "my former colleagues have presented me with a broad hint." This was the tribute to which Hugo Redfern had referred.

"Good for them. Good for them," Sir Gerald said.

Charley introduced Jean as "his betrothed." Then he turned to me. I was standing behind him, still holding the suitcase. "This is my great friend, Paul Hunter," he said. "To him I owe my emergence as a professional actor."

"You do?" said Sir Gerald, in the manner of a proud father who believes his son a born comedian. "Then I shall hold him entirely responsible for your conduct. You'd better get rid of the baggage in there," he said to me, indicating the first-class compartment.

When I returned from my errand, Sir Gerald was proposing to

Charley that he meet his future colleagues. This, I feared, would prove an ordeal. Already I had sensed a certain resentment on the part of these seasoned players towards the favored novice who was to sit with Sir Gerald in the first-class compartment. It was natural that they should be prejudiced against him.

Surely, though unconsciously and quite effortlessly, Charley disarmed them. He was "honored to meet" each one of them without distinction. But that was not all. To each one of them he bowed ceremoniously and, as he did so, presented his visiting card!

His action was never forgotten. It is still lovingly recalled in theatrical circles as the perfect illustration of his charm and simplicity, which set him above the rivalries and jealousies that have always plagued the professional stage. I watched it take effect. I watched it melt those players who but a few seconds before had regarded him as a natural enemy.

They dared not look at each other, for they wanted to laugh but would not have hurt his feelings for the world. Sir Gerald came to their rescue.

"Why haven't you given *me* your card?" he asked Charley. "Don't you think I deserve it?"

"I'm afraid that when I first met you, Sir Gerald, I didn't possess such a thing. I was still a clerk then, remember. I've had these printed on the strength of my expectations."

"Well, there's nothing like optimism," Sir Gerald laughed, clapping him on the back. The others joined in heartily.

At this moment there was a general movement towards the train. "Due to leave in a couple of minutes," Sir Gerald shouted hopefully, as he climbed aboard.

Charley looked round for Jean and me. We were still standing nearby, but we had been detached witnesses of his introduction to theater life — and his new friends.

"Good-by, Charley," I said, shaking hands with him, "and the best of luck."

"I'll write to you, Uncle Paul."

I moved off down the platform. Charley was embracing Jean, and I suppose it was then that she gave him the book, her *gage d'amour*. I stopped when I heard the whistle blow. Jean was standing alone where I had left her, a fragile figure, her right arm half-raised and motionless in a gesture of reluctant farewell. Charley was at the carriage window, blowing her kisses.

Jean turned away and came towards me, trying hard to smile. As we walked down the platform together I started talking about Charley's comic use of his visiting cards. I was trying to cheer her up. Suddenly she began crying, softly, yet quite openly. It was the only time I ever saw her cry. "Poor Charley," she said through her tears, "poor Charley."

"Good heavens," I said, "you've no need to worry about him. He'll get on splendidly."

CHAPTER V

I NEVER KNEW much about the life Charley led during the first few months of his stage career. Some six weeks after he had left Manchester he wrote me a short note, from Birmingham.

This is the farthest south I have ever been. On the whole I prefer the North. I fancy I am doing better as secretary than actor, for as yet I have not attracted the attention of any local "Paul Hunter," and there have been no additions to my press cutting book. However, you must admit that the "second gentleman" is not exactly a telling role, and it's the best I've been given so far.

Your affectionate friend,

CHARLEY

I had heard all this, and more besides, from Jean. He was clearly proving himself extremely useful to Sir Gerald, who trusted him to conduct interviews and to handle most of his correspondence without supervision. Both Sir Gerald and Lady Willard, who were childless, treated him more like a son than an employee. Lady Willard had insisted he buy some new clothes and had persuaded her husband to advance him a loan and had herself taken him on a shopping expedition. Sir Gerald taught him to play golf. He had made him a present of a set of clubs, and now on most non-matinee days they had a game together in the afternoon. Charley did not live with the Willards. He lived on his salary, which meant staying in the cheapest possible theatrical lodginghouses. But he dined with them every Sunday and on an average of two or three times a week they invited him to have supper with them after the evening performance.

He had little to say about the rest of the company, though once

he mentioned his amazement on learning that several of the "supers" had been actors for years, yet were still being paid as low a salary as he was getting himself. This struck him as unfair. "It doesn't seem right. Even if they haven't much talent, their seniority ought to be taken into account."

His letters to Jean were essentially assessments of his prospects. His goal was to be an established actor, so he could support a family. Thus, while he wrote glowingly of Sir Gerald's kindness to him, he was a little suspicious of it:

Happen he's finding me too good a secretary. He hasn't let me play a proper part yet any road; and sometimes he doesn't seem particularly interested in my acting. He tells me I must wait my turn. When I pointed out that I couldn't afford to wait and that I wanted a chance to prove myself right away, he advised me to poison Harvey Foster — he's the juvenile lead whom I understudy. However, Sir Gerald's a softhearted man, really. I fancy he'll give me the chance I need if I ask him often enough. I won't have to commit a crime to get it.

His letters could not have been better designed to please Jean. They encouraged her to disregard the present, in which she could plainly find no joy whatever, and to live in a dream future.

In mid-July, the Repertory Company's season came to an end, and Jean returned to London. She said she hoped to find a job there. A few weeks later, I had a letter from her in which she told me that she had been engaged for a small part in a new play which Granville-Barker was producing at the Savoy Theater. She showed a spark of her old independent, self-assertive spirit when she wrote:

Mr. Barker was enraptured by my reading. He said the part would not do me justice and he wished it could be five times as long. Renee wanted to be in the play, too. She applied, but there was nothing for her. She'll be green with envy.

I took my holiday in August. I went to Salzburg with Algernon Hart, who had been my greatest friend at Oxford and was now at the

outset of his distinguished career in music. Upon my return to England I still had a few days left and these I spent in London. I telephoned Jean on the evening of my arrival — she was living with her mother in their house in Earl's Court — and we arranged to have tea together on the following day after her rehearsal at the Savoy Hotel.

She seemed far more cheerful than when I had last seen her. After asking me a little about myself, she started chattering about her own affairs. Mr. Barker, she told me, was "a very strict man." They had already been rehearsing a fortnight and hadn't been allowed to "walk a step" on the stage yet. Mr. Barker kept them sitting round a table and made them repeat every line after him, over and over again, "like parrots." I was in love at the time with the theater of the old actor-managers and had little knowledge or appreciation of the genius of Granville-Barker. So now, as Jean described them, his methods struck me as senseless and painful from the actor's point of view. With this thought in mind, I asked — a trifle maliciously, I'm afraid — "Is Renee still green with envy?"

"Oh, she's got another job."

"Have you seen her then?"

"No, I don't want to. She's asked me to meet her several times, but I've always made up some excuse. The last time she lost her temper, and slammed down the receiver. I think she must have smelled a rat!"

"Is her job in London?" I asked.

"Yes — with Mr. Silken."

"Not in *The Silver Morn*?" I was impressed, for a recent announcement that Laurence Silken was to produce this first play by Francis Campbell, the poet and novelist, had occasioned considerable interest. "Has she got a good part, do you know?"

"The second lead, I suppose. She says there are only two women in the cast."

"Well!"

"Oh, you needn't sound so pleased, Uncle Paul," she said with

more honesty than spite. "She's only rehearsing on approval. And anyway Mr. Silken's not a patch on Mr. Barker."

At this moment I noticed, perhaps because she meant me to, that she was wearing an engagement ring: a single emerald in a gold setting. A look of sheer pride spread over her face when I asked her about it.

"Charley started saving up to buy it for me before he left Manchester," she said. "It cost fifteen pounds. Do you like it?"

"Very much."

"I think it's lovely. I always wanted an emerald. Green's my favorite color."

"I suppose you daren't wear it in front of your mother?"

"Of course I dare. Charley gave it to me in front of mother. He came to ask her for my hand."

"You mean Charley's been in London?"

"Yes. He only left last Sunday."

She told me that Sir Gerald Willard's company had had three weeks "out," and during that time, while preparations were being made for the autumn tour, Charley had stayed with the Willards at their home near Hampstead Heath.

When Charley reached London, Jean — I am reconstructing her story in my own words — had already been back approximately a month. During that time her mother had shown increasingly suspicious and irritated curiosity about Charley's letters. Who were these letters from? Mrs. Craven demanded to know persistently, and as persistently Jean refused to tell her. Jean took it for granted that her mother would disapprove of her engagement. Charley, however, thought differently. He decided that it was only right and proper that he should endeavor to obtain Mrs. Craven's blessing. Without warning he turned up to do this on the very evening of his arrival in London.

Jean introduced him to her mother as a friend, a fellow actor. The three of them chatted together for a while, Charley devoting most of his attention to Mrs. Craven. He endorsed that lady's extravagant

praise of her daughter's acting and agreed with all her acidulous comments on the state of the stage. Then, quite suddenly, he said that he would appreciate the opportunity of a few words with her alone. Jean was amazed, and Mrs. Craven hardly less so. Nevertheless she obligingly requested Jean to leave the room.

Half an hour later Jean was summoned back. The scene which followed might have come straight out of a Victorian comedy. Charley stood stiffly, his back half turned to them. Mrs. Craven was seated, her head bowed, and she held her daughter's hand. For several seconds there was complete silence. Then, lifting her tear-filled eyes, Mrs. Craven announced that "the young man had told her everything." She was shocked and a little hurt that her own child had failed to confide in her. Nevertheless she was not the selfish kind of mother who would stand in the way of two young people's happiness. She had, therefore, given her consent to the engagement on the understanding, first, that Charley would not think of marrying until he was in a position to support a wife and family (in the latter, so Jean presumed, she included herself); and, second, that Charley would not require Jean to "sacrifice her career" after marriage.

Charley agreed to these conditions, and he embraced his prospective mother-in-law, embraced Jean, and from an inner pocket of his coat produced the engagement ring!

Jean herself had little idea of what was said at that interview between Charley and her mother. She considered it miraculous that he had won Mrs. Craven's blessing. But of course, as she said, she really thought now that Charley could "charm the bird from the tree." Besides, it was true that Mrs. Craven's attitude towards him had become less sweet in his absence. As soon as he left London, Mrs. Craven started to nag Jean about him. She admitted he was handsome and had good manners. In fact, he was too handsome and his manners were too good, for her liking. She was not certain that he was "even a gentleman."

Still, the fact remained that she had given her consent: Jean and

Charley were now officially engaged. Jean told me that she felt no call to answer her mother's complaints and suspicions about Charley; that she "treated them with the contempt they deserved." After all, she said, she knew her mother! And thank goodness she wouldn't have to "stand" her much longer. She had Charley's word for that.

"You haven't told me much about Charley himself," I said, as we were leaving. "Is he any different?"

"You wouldn't think so, Uncle Paul. Except, in his new clothes, he looks more of a swell than he did."

"What do *you* think?"

She paused for a moment, her eyebrows knitted. "Well, he's a bit mixed."

"Mixed?" She had a habit of using expressions peculiar to herself. "You mean confused? That's quite understandable, isn't it? He's been thrown into a life entirely different from anything he's known before."

"It isn't that so much. I can't really explain what it is."

"Give me an example."

"He agreed with my mother that he wouldn't ask me to leave the stage after we're married," she said with sudden clarity. "And later he said to me — he was quite excited about it — that we'd be able to act together; a new theatrical partnership. That's what you suggested, once, Uncle Paul."

"I still think it's a good idea."

"But Charley doesn't really want me to go on being an actress. I know he doesn't. I told you so before."

"Is that why you say he's confused?" I asked a trifle mockingly.

"In a way."

I thought her conviction that Charley wanted her to leave the stage was probably nothing more than a figment of her imagination. I laughed it aside. "If I were you," I said, getting up, "I'd wait and see. The important thing is that if Charley has his way you're going to be married very soon."

Nothing occurred during the next six months to suggest that Charley was nearer having his way. But at the beginning of April, when he had been with Sir Gerald just one month short of a year, the news came through that he had been selected to play a leading part in the West End of London.

The story which this news portended may seem tame and banal to those who live in an age when the star-in-a-night theme of musical comedy has regrettably become a cliché of the real life of the theater. But at the time it was unusual enough to acquire the quality of a legend.

For some while it had been known that Laurence Silken was busy preparing the production of a second play by Francis Campbell. *Silver Morn* had run for several months, and had been a considerable *succès d'estime*. The new play was a poetic drama which told the love story of a young god and a mortal princess, the story of Cupid and Psyche. Iris Fairfax was to star as the princess, and Renee Logan, who had scored a minor "hit" in *Silver Morn*, was to be given an important role. But Silken was having enormous difficulty in casting the male lead. His trouble was that though there were a number of established actors who could play the part in the romantic tradition, as it needed to be played, not one of them was physically right.

Silken embarked on a series of explorations into the provinces in the hope of discovering an unknown actor who might serve his purpose; unknown, that is, to West End audiences.

One night he arrived unheralded at a touring theater in suburban London, where Sir Gerald Willard and his company were giving *As You Like It*. He was accompanied by Francis Campbell, whom he had brought to see Harvey Foster act Orlando.

On this particular night Foster was "off," having succumbed to a common cold, and Orlando was being played by an understudy, a fellow named Charles Stranleigh. In the circumstances Silken saw no point in sitting through the performance. But Campbell, who had less experience of casting problems and was therefore more optimistic,

persuaded him to stay. There was an off-chance, he argued, that they might come across someone else in the company worth considering. After all, they were desperate, for rehearsals were scheduled to start in a fortnight.

According to the story which later was so widely circulated, Campbell decided after Orlando's first scene that he would have no one but Charley for his young god. They would never find another actor who had at once the voice for it, the immaculate youth and the extraordinary beauty of appearance. He told Silken so.

When the performance was over, the two of them went round to see Sir Gerald. Sir Gerald was reluctant to lose Charley, but said he would not stand in his way. At the same time he felt bound to point out that Charley was virtually without experience. Silken agreed that to employ a comparative novice, however gifted, would be risky. Campbell was insistent, and eventually Silken gave in. At the end of the week Charley left Sir Gerald to become, at one bound, a leading actor of the West End stage.

My paper naturally made much of this. I was required to write a full account of Charley's career from the time I had first discovered him as an amateur actor in Blackley. I also passed on to my readers word from Norman Grant that he was going to London to assist in coaching Charley.

I expected some word from Charley himself, but, when none came, I wrote to Jean enclosing a note of congratulations for him. He replied almost by return post, briefly but effusively. I gathered from the address at the top of the notepaper that he was living in furnished rooms in Bayswater.

Three weeks later, I had a letter from Jean.

Dearest Uncle Paul,

Charley has told me to warn you that the wedding will probably take place at the beginning of June—so be prepared. His play opens here (at the Adelphi) on May 25, and we will make final arrangements after that. He is now on tour.

They are doing the play for a week in Canterbury and another week in Oxford before bringing it to London. My mother is secretly hoping that it will fail, but of course it won't. I expect you know Renee is in it. I wonder how she likes playing second fiddle to the clerk! She's as sweet as honey on the outside, and still tries to be patronizing. When I went to see Charley off on Sunday, she said, "Don't worry, Jean dear, I'll look after him for you." She really is horrid. My play comes off on Saturday. Mr. Barker has not yet said he wants me for his next production but when he does I shall not be interested. Do write and say that you're ready to come to London at the beginning of June.

Your loving cousin,

JEAN

Ten days later, a telegram was delivered to me at the office in the late afternoon. It said: VITAL THAT I SEE YOU AS SOON AS POSSIBLE STOP IMPLORE YOU NOT TO DELAY STOP TELL NO ONE STOP TELEGRAPH TIME OF ARRIVAL HERE STRANLEIGH MITRE HOTEL OXFORD. I thought at once he must be in some sort of trouble. Why else the enjoiner of secrecy? It was characteristic of him to assume that I would come at once. And, of course, I did. First, I obtained leave of absence from my editor, on the pretext of a sudden and serious illness in the family. Then I retelegraphed Charley I would be arriving at 3:30 on the following afternoon. That was Friday.

It was a long, tedious, cross-country journey, and at the end of it I felt tired and disheveled. Charley was waiting on the platform to meet me. He looked immaculate.

"Ah, Uncle Paul," he said, relieving me of my suitcase, "I am delighted to see you." There was no indication in his greeting that a whole year had passed since we had last met; no indication either that he was aware that I had come dashing nearly halfway across England to see him.

We got into a tumble-down hansom cab. After directing the driver to take us to the Mitre Hotel, he remarked with a slight smile,

"Wasn't it Max Beerbohm who said 'All good hansoms go to Oxford when they die?' "

"I dare say," I replied rather irritably. I was in no mood for palaver. I wanted him to explain why he had sent for me.

He turned away from me, and gazed out of the cab abstractedly. He was wearing an impeccably fashioned suit, a high wing collar and bow tie, and pointed, cloth-topped buttoned boots. He was carrying a heavy, polished walking stick, and this he was using now as a prop for both his hands as he leaned forward. He certainly looked more like a swell than he had done in his Manchester days — or more like an actor being a swell.

"Look here, Charley, don't you think you'd better tell me what the trouble is?" I said.

"Trouble?"

"What is it you want to talk to me about . . . ?"

"Oh, there's no hurry."

"There may not be for you . . ." I said angrily.

"Please, Uncle Paul. Wait till we get back to the hotel."

"All right. But glad as I am to see you again, Charley, remember I have my own job to do. I hope you haven't brought me here on a wild-goose chase. Because if you have —"

"I assure you I have not," he said with conviction.

A porter took my bag as we entered the hotel.

"Have you reserved a room for me?" I asked Charley. "I might as well stay here as anywhere."

"I'm afraid not."

"Then I'd better see about it at once."

"No, no — leave it for the moment. It will be all right." He seemed embarrassed. "Look after Mr. Hunter's bag, won't you?" he said to the porter.

"I think," he said, leading the way, "we'd better go to the smoking room. There won't be anyone else there at this hour."

He rang for the waiter before we settled down in two capacious armchairs.

"Shall we have a cup of tea or a glass of sherry?" he said as my host.

"Have *you* taken to drink, Charley?"

He ignored the question. "You must be feeling tired after your long journey. A glass of sherry will buck you up."

When the waiter came hurrying in, Charley said, "Two glasses of sherry, if you please."

"Certainly, sir. Sweet or dry, sir?"

He hesitated for a moment. "Ah, that is a problem I will leave you to settle, Paul."

"Dry for me, please."

"And for me also," he said promptly.

We chatted idly for a while. I asked him about the play, and he expressed complete confidence in its success. I was getting increasingly irritated at his failure to come to the point.

He offered me a cigarette and, to my surprise, took one for himself. He leaned back in his chair.

"Paul," he said, exhaling a long puff of smoke expertly, "I was married this morning."

"You were what?" I exclaimed involuntarily, and all at once found myself extremely upset. "Then I'm too late."

"Well — I —"

"But my dear fellow, why didn't you warn me in your telegram? Why didn't you give me longer notice? You surely could have done. Or Jean could have. I really am rather hurt. Where *is* Jean, by the way? Doesn't she dare face me?"

"I'm not married to Jean," he said slowly. "I'm married to Renee."

"To Renee?" I repeated after him, hearing what he said, but hardly comprehending it.

"Renee Logan. I dare say you remember her."

"You must be joking."

"No, Paul."

The waiter returned at this moment, and there was a taut silence

broken only by the tiny sound made as he put down the two glasses of sherry on the table before us.

"But it's impossible," I burst out when we were alone again. "Why, Jean wrote to me only last week and —"

"I know. This happened very suddenly."

He picked up his glass of sherry, and took a few sips, contemplatively. At last he said, "You seem shocked."

"I can't pretend to understand." I knew my voice sounded choked.

"I'm sorry my news distresses you. I can only tell you that it's for the best. One day you'll agree."

"My dear Charley, I'm not going to judge you. It's none of my business what you do or whom you marry. But you can't expect me to be overjoyed. After all, I introduced you to Jean. I'm fond of both of you. I'd almost come to regard you two as one. I thought your love for each other was — was —"

"I love Jean very deeply. I always shall."

"What!" I gasped. "Then why —" I got to my feet. "Why have you treated her like this?"

"I couldn't help myself." He paused, then continued, almost as if he were repeating words he had learned by heart: "I realize now that it would have been quite wrong for Jean and me to marry. It isn't her fault — bless her darling heart — it's mine. But she'd never have been the right wife for me, especially in the life I've chosen. In the end I'd only have made her miserable."

"No one could possibly love you more than Jean. You must know that perfectly well. Is Renee really in love with you?"

I asked the question rhetorically, for I could not believe she was. I supposed she had decided that Charley was a good "catch," and had deliberately ensnared him.

"Yes, Paul," he said, and I had a faint suspicion that he was trying to convince himself as well as me, "I'm sure she is."

"And you with her?"

"She has taught me the meaning of love. I couldn't be happy without her."

I felt my temper mounting. "For God's sake," I nearly shouted, "what made you do this thing? You've known Renee only a few weeks. How did she inveigle you . . . ?"

"That's nowt —" he began explosively, half rising from his chair in anger. But he recovered himself before going further. "I'm sorry. But I'd really rather you didn't cross-examine me."

"My dear Charley," I said, "I wouldn't dream of forcing your confidence. But I understood you wanted to talk to me. I might remind you that I've made a rather long and tiring journey at your request."

He did not reply. There was another silence, while we sat sipping our sherry. Had he, I began to wonder, told me everything he intended to tell? If so, what possible excuse could he offer for having brought me all this way? I was about to ask him, when he said dreamily. "I'd hate to think that Jean and I couldn't go on being friends. But she'll get over this, won't she?"

I was flabbergasted. Then I concluded that he was not expecting an honest answer, but was seeking encouragement from me in a process of self-deception. I saw no reason to spare his feelings.

"I very much doubt it," I said. "How did she take the news?"

"She doesn't know yet."

"She surely doesn't think she's still engaged to you?" I exclaimed.

"I'm afraid she does."

"You mean you haven't told her that —"

"I've told her nothing."

"Charley, this is too cruel! You say you love Jean. But it seems to me you can't have any feelings for her at all. Your behavior is callous."

"I don't mean it to be."

"Charley, you can catch a train for London after your performance tonight. You can see Jean first thing in the morning and be back in time for the matinee. You've got to tell her."

"I can't. I won't." He spoke not petulantly, but with finality.

"Very well. If you prefer the coward's way out — at least write to her."

"No. That's impossible."

"Then I'll tell her," I said, overcome with indignation. "I'll say you sent me."

I started towards the door. He came up quickly behind me, and caught me by the arm. "Thank you, Uncle Paul," he said. "That's what I wanted — that's what I hoped you'd do."

For a moment I thought he was making a cheap effort to score off me. Then, to my amazement, I realized that he was being perfectly sincere. His face was wearing that same expression of simple perplexity — in itself a mute yet somehow irresistible appeal for help — as when he had asked me to call on Norman Grant. Again I was disarmed.

"Is that why you sent for me? . . . To ask me to see Jean for you?"

"Yes," he replied, with unhesitating candor. "I had to."

There was a pause. "No, Charley, no," I said bringing my fist down. "This is something you must do for yourself."

He started to explain it was really out of consideration for Jean that he had married Renee so hastily. As Renee herself had pointed out — and she was fond of Jean — a wedding in the glare of publicity after their return to town would have made things far harder for Jean. He had tried several times in the past week to write to Jean but had been unable to find the right words. Only yesterday morning he had traveled up to London especially to see her. "When I got there," he said, "before I had even left Paddington Station, I knew that if I saw her I wouldn't have the heart to say a word. So I came back by the next train. And then I sent that telegram to you."

As he talked on, I began to feel that, perhaps, he had something more than compassion left for her. It seemed that he could not bear the thought of being beyond her forgiveness, of losing her friendship forever. He wanted me to do more than tell her what he had lacked

the courage to tell her himself. He wanted me to prepare the way for him to see her again. He wanted me, as he repeated several times, to "make her understand." I saw no hope of that. But eventually I agreed to see Jean for him.

"Thank you, Uncle Paul," he said. "I can't begin to express my gratitude." He looked at his watch which I recognized as the one that had been presented to him by his former colleagues in the Northern Dyestuffs Company. "It is now 4:30," he said. "There's a five o'clock train to London which you could catch."

I laughed out loud, though I was in no mood for laughter. "I see you had everything carefully planned," I said.

"I was sure you would not fail me," he replied unsmilingly.

Ten minutes later, he was seeing me into a cab outside the hotel. In the interim he had told me a little about his own and Renee's plans: how they hoped to rent a house near Regent's Park; how they intended always to act together and eventually to go into management.

As we said good-by, I promised that I would telephone him to-night after I had seen Jean. The cab drove off.

"Uncle Paul!" Jean said on the telephone. "What are you doing in London? Have you given up your job?"

"I'll tell you when I see you," I said. I found myself speaking lightly, with forced cheerfulness. "I'd like to come and call on you if I may."

"Oh, yes, please do. Have you had dinner?"

"Yes, thank you." I had purposely lingered over my dinner and had drunk a bottle of wine to give me courage. It was now half-past eight.

"Well, come as quickly as you can."

When the maid showed me in, Mrs. Craven was playing a game of patience. Jean was working some embroidery. The room, so full of crinkum-crankum, so heavily furnished with ugly Victorian furniture and hangings, was perfectly reflective of Mrs. Craven.

She looked like one of its permanent fixtures; obstinately so.

I would still have to get rid of her before I could break my news to Jean. I wondered how on earth I was going to do this.

"You're quite a stranger," she said coldly.

"Yes," I said, receiving her limp handshake.

I turned to Jean. "How are you, Jean?"

"Oh, *I'm* quite all right," she said; she apparently used the emphasis to draw a distinction between her mother and herself.

"How are you, Uncle Paul?"

I looked round awkwardly. "You may bring up that chair from over there," Mrs. Craven said, pointing to the far side of the room. I sat down between them. The atmosphere was tense. Mrs. Craven had never before treated me with such ill temper.

"When did you leave Manchester, Uncle Paul?"

"Early this morning."

"Oh? How is the Repertory Company?"

"Still going on. Not so good, of course, as when —"

"Jean tells me," Mrs. Craven said abruptly, "that you are a friend of young Mr. — of her fiancé."

"Yes," I replied, and forced myself to add: "As a matter of fact, I've just come from him."

Jean's face was at once alight with excited surprise. "You've *seen* Charley, Uncle Paul? When? Where?"

"In Oxford. You see —"

"Do you consider him a suitable match for Jean?" Mrs. Craven resumed, ignoring the interruption.

"Please, Mother. I've told you a dozen times what Uncle Paul thinks. And anyway —"

"I'd prefer Paul to speak for himself. Then we shall know where we stand."

"Oh, will you hold your tongue, Mother! I want to hear about Charley, Uncle Paul. I'm really very cross with him. He hasn't written to me for more than a week."

"I will not hold my tongue," Mrs. Craven said. "And I should

think Paul must be extremely shocked to hear you talk to me like that."

Although they were quarreling openly now, I was too consumed with a knowledge that neither of them shared to be embarrassed.

"Cousin Blanche," I said, addressing Mrs. Craven by the name she had requested me to use when we had first met, "I'm afraid that you may think this very rude. But there's something I have to say to Jean. I wonder if you'd mind if I spoke to her alone for a few minutes."

At first she looked surprised. Then her mouth set angrily. "Are you asking me to leave my own drawing room?"

"Well, perhaps there's somewhere else we could go —"

"It may be your opinion that a daughter should be allowed to have secrets from her mother, but it isn't mine."

"I'm sorry, but this is for Jean's ears only. If she wants to tell you about it afterwards, that's her business."

A soft yet compelling voice spoke behind me. "It's about Charley, isn't it?" Jean had moved forward to the edge of her chair. Her lips were trembling and her face was drained of color. It seemed that she knew already. "What is it?" she asked. "Tell me."

"Jean," I began, and stopped short. All the cliché preliminaries I had intended to use, all the calculated obscurities, the sweetenings of the bitter truth, seemed cheap. "Jean," I said as swiftly as I could, "Charley's married. He wanted me to tell you."

I had believed her prepared; and perhaps she was. Yet I had the impression of having hit her a sudden, vicious blow across the face. But then, mercifully, my attention was distracted.

"What do you mean, he's married?"

The piercing exclamation came from Mrs. Craven. It was astonished and indignant, but in her rapid-fire questions that followed I detected a note of definite relish.

I told her what little I knew — when Charley had married and to whom he was married. While we were talking, Jean made no sound at all.

Suddenly Mrs. Craven went over to her and attempted to enfold her in her arms. But Jean was huddled back in her chair and would not move. It was as if she were using the chair as an entrenchment to protect herself from her mother and from me and all the world.

"Oh, my poor baby!" Mrs. Craven cried. "My poor, darling baby!"

"Leave me alone, Mother. Please leave me alone." The voice was muffled, for she had twisted her body round and was speaking into the back of the chair. Yet its tone was final and flat.

Mrs. Craven got angrily to her feet. "Very well, you can get over this without me." She went to the door, hesitated, then crossed to the far side of the room and sat down with her back to us.

I sat watching Jean, uncertain what to do or say. At last, I took her hand in mine. It was hot yet lifeless to my touch.

"Jean," I murmured gently, as if addressing an invalid. "There's a lot more I want to say to you. But, perhaps, you'd prefer me to come back later."

She turned her head slowly to face me. I realized now that she had not been crying. Her eyes were neither red nor tearful, but they looked utterly remote, deadened.

"No, Uncle Paul. I never want to see you again." She said this not hysterically, not bitterly, but as a mere statement of fact.

I was at once on the defensive. "I'm sorry you feel like that," I said. "You know, I didn't deliberately mislead you. I couldn't possibly have foreseen this. I don't understand it at all."

"I understand it. I told you it would happen. I always knew it would."

"Oh no, Jean, it isn't fair to say that exactly. After all —"

"Yes, I know. I pretended to myself that I was wrong. Even after that luncheon when you asked her to meet him, I went on pretending. I wanted to so much —"

I had expected recriminations — but not this. She was accusing me not only of having persuaded her against her will to let Charley

go on the stage, but of having arranged his first meeting with Renee, of having fashioned his fate.

"But Jean," I protested, "it wasn't my idea to invite Renee. You suggested it yourself."

"But you hoped I would, didn't you?" I couldn't deny that, so I held my tongue. "And in any case," she continued, "I wanted to see."

"See what?"

"Whether what did happen . . . would happen. It was a kind of test."

"Nothing happened then — at least nothing of any consequence. And, apart from that, how could you possibly have guessed that Charley would *marry* Renee one day?"

"Oh, perhaps not Renee herself. But someone like her. Another Renee. I can't explain it to you, Uncle Paul." She turned her head away.

I thought she was talking nonsense.

"Of course," she resumed in the same dulled tone, "Renee would never have looked at him if he'd still been a clerk. She doesn't love him, she doesn't even know him. She hasn't married Charley. She's married a reflection. Oh, perhaps she'll help him more in his career than I could ever have done. But," she added, and now for the first time there was a note of real anguish in her voice, of threatened tears, "he'll never be happy with her. And it is so sad."

"Jean," I said, conscious of what inadequate comfort this was, "Charley hopes you'll go on being friends with him. You're still very important to him."

"Oh, no. I couldn't bear to see him again. I shall go away."

Mrs. Craven had come up behind us. "You'll do nothing of the sort," she snapped. "You'll stay here and face this out."

Jean walked swiftly across the room to the window, like an animal scurrying away from someone intent on tormenting it. Mrs. Craven followed, encouraging and admonishing her in turn: Jean mustn't think that she was unsympathetic, but after all she

had warned her over and over again, hadn't she? She blamed herself for not having been firmer. Perhaps Jean would listen to her mother in future. Jean still had her own career. That was the important thing. She had it in her to be a far finer actress than that Logan girl. That was the way she'd "show" both of them — *him* and *her*.

Jean stood mute and still. Then she put her hands to her ears to block out the sound. Mrs. Craven raised her voice to a near scream. "Anyway, good riddance to him is what I say. You'll be thankful one day that you haven't got that miserable rotter hanging round your neck."

Suddenly Jean turned on her. Her eyes were blazing. "He isn't a rotter," she cried. She ran from the room, and a second or two later the front door slammed.

A momentary silence was broken by Mrs. Craven's feeble, distracted exclamation, "She's gone out without a coat or hat."

I had an impulse to follow Jean and try to bring her back. But I hesitated, and by then I was too late.

Accidental death was the verdict returned at the inquest. She had run in front of a tram — according to the evidence, without looking where she was going. She had been killed instantaneously.

Without doubt that was the verdict Jean herself would have wished. But I could not believe it was the correct one. I felt sure she had seen the tram coming. The coroner asked, in some bewilderment, what she had been doing aimlessly walking at night near Battersea Bridge, more than two miles from her home, when she was not even dressed for out of doors. His questions were not answered satisfactorily, because I held my tongue, and so did Mrs. Craven. I suspected that Mrs. Craven also knew in her heart of hearts that Jean had committed suicide. But she never said so.

When the news first came, Mrs. Craven collapsed, and I had to go and identify the body. That was a ghastly business. Jean's face

was so badly cut as to be hardly recognizable, but her left hand, unmarked, was still wearing the emerald ring.

I returned to find Mrs. Craven in a state of near insanity. She held Charley entirely responsible for Jean's death and intended, if it was the last thing she did, to "make him pay for it." She was going to create such a scandal that he would never dare set foot on the stage again. She was going to tell the newspapers at once.

Finally I persuaded her to take a strong dose of sedative, and left her in the care of the maid. I extracted a promise that she would do nothing about informing the newspapers until morning.

It was past two o'clock when I reached Charley on the telephone. I told him what had happened. He did not say a word. . . . "Charley, are you there?" I asked. . . . I realized then that he had replaced the receiver.

Next morning, Mrs. Craven was a little more composed, but still determined to make a public scandal. By the end of half an hour I was convinced she meant to ruin Charley's career if she could.

Then an extraordinary thing happened.

The door was opened, and the maid announced, "Mr. Stranleigh, M'm." Charley walked into the room. He had not taken off his overcoat, and he carried his hat in his hand. He stopped a few feet away from Mrs. Craven.

I was amazed. I should never have suspected him of the courage to come here now. The effect on Mrs. Craven was frightening. With a gasp of fury, she half rose from her chair. She began to tremble.

Charley stood motionless, looking at her. There was an indescribable expression on his face — an expression in which true penitence and sadness were blended. Then he said simply, "I'm sorry. There's nothing more I can say now. I wanted you to know that I'm sorry." I could have sworn he spoke from his heart.

She stared at him, stupefied. Slowly he went up to her, leaned down and kissed her on the cheek. Then he turned, and, without another word, walked out of the room.

She remained silent after he had gone, until, very quietly, she

began to cry. For the first time I was touched by her tears, because they seemed to me not the tears of rage or hysteria or self-pity I had witnessed previously, but tears of genuine grief. Her behavior now was incompatible with anything I had ever thought or observed about this sour and warped woman. And after all these years I have but one explanation for it: that some quality responsive to Jean's own spirit, hitherto lying dormant in her nature, had been aroused. Indeed, I think that at this moment she was weeping not so much for her daughter who was dead as for the man whom her daughter had loved.

PART TWO

Renee

CHAPTER VI

CHARLEY'S NAME was not mentioned at the inquest or in the newspapers. Only a few people had known about his engagement to Jean.

He did not come to the funeral but he sent flowers and a note to Mrs. Craven that touched her deeply. She did not show it to me.

I imagined that I had probably seen the last of Charley, and I was not sorry. He seemed as dead for me as Jean was. I doubted if the man I had once supposed him to be had ever really existed and I felt certain that he existed no longer.

Just as I was ready to return to Manchester, I received instructions from my editor to cover the first night of *Cupid and Psyche*. My editor wanted a "story," not a criticism; its length to be dependent on what sort of showing Charles Stranleigh made.

As it happened, I wrote a lyrical column and a half, and it was printed in full under the headline, "Charles Stranleigh Comes and Conquers." "The old adage," it began, "that what Manchester thinks today, London thinks tomorrow, was justified once again at the Adelphi Theater last night when . . ."

What I wrote was professionally correct. I reported a great occasion: Charley not only stole the honors from the rest of the performers, including his wife and Iris Fairfax, but robbed the playwright of credit for having written the play. It was, as a matter of fact, a good and dramatically effective play, well produced and well acted. But none of this seemed to matter; or rather all of it became blended, as colors are blended to make one color, into a single triumph.

And that triumph was Charley's alone, a triumph of romantic acting. Romantic acting is nowadays less fashionable than realistic

acting, but at its best, I believe, it is an art, whereas the other can never be more than a technique, however skilled. All that a realistic actor must do is to convince his audience of the existence of some "true to life" character whose counterpart they have met or may reasonably expect to meet outside the theater. But a romantic actor must convince his audience of the existence of a character whose counterpart they have never met outside the theater and never will meet. Realistic acting makes its appeal to the memory; romantic acting to the imagination.

Charley had a role that suited him to perfection. He created the extraordinarily exciting illusion that he *was* Cupid, rather than an actor dressed up as Cupid. And when he spoke he enhanced this illusion: for his voice, developed under Norman Grant's tutorship, had become a thing of unique and unearthly beauty. It had a gentle *timbre* which could lend a glow to the lightest comedy, yet it was essentially grandiose, and was most thrilling in the interpretation of strong emotions. On soft notes and loud, high and low, it could fill and endow with magic every part of the largest auditorium. It could take its listeners, in imagination, up to the mountaintops or down into the valleys. It was in itself a make-believe world of moonlit balconies, of glorious battlefields, of enchanted islands, of ancient palaces. It appeared to draw its power from preternatural sources. Once heard, it was haunting, and whenever heard again was a reminder not of words or occasions associated with it, but only of itself.

There was tremendous applause from the gallery at the end of the first act, and the comments that then began to buzz around me in the stalls clearly revealed its portent. "Of course, Cupid's the whole play." "He's wonderful." "A born actor." "A real find." "That voice!" "Like liquid silver." "And that magnificent appearance!" "I'd like to see him do Hamlet." "He could do anything." "Never seen anyone quite like him." "He's a young Irving." "Better than Irving." "What's he done before, do you know?" "Where does he come from?" "I'd adore to meet him." "Is he married?"

When the curtain fell on the last act, the applause was like a storm, the clapping being drowned repeatedly by thunderous shouts of "Bravo!" Speeches from Iris Fairfax, the star, from Francis Campbell, the author, and from Laurence Silken, the producer, were suffered politely; but the audience would not allow the curtain to stay down until they had heard from Charley. At last, he received a nod of approval from Silken. He kissed his leading lady's hand; he kissed his wife's hand; he stepped forward and bowed.

"Ladies and gentlemen, two years ago I was a clerk and now —" He made a large gesture, the signal for a further outburst of applause. "But as a clerk, a humble and none too diligent clerk, I learned one lesson I shall never forget: the importance of the clock." The audience laughed delightedly; their god had a sense of humor. "So I must be brief. But not too brief to express the gratitude that is in my heart. My gratitude to Mr. Campbell and Mr. Silken for having given me this great opportunity; my gratitude to Miss Fairfax with whom it has been such an honor for me to play; my gratitude to all the members of this distinguished company, and my gratitude to certain others I remember at this moment. Above all, ladies and gentlemen, for the generosity of your reception which has overwhelmed me, my gratitude, my very deep gratitude, to you." He started to bow gracefully once again. "Good night, and God bless you."

I had no inclination to go behind and congratulate Charley. I did not begrudge the actor his success, but the thought of seeing him aglow with it, so soon after Jean's death, was repulsive. Even more repulsive was the thought of meeting Renee, triumphant in the knowledge that she had picked a winner.

I was about to step into a cab, when I felt a hand on my shoulder. "Where are you off to in such a hurry, dear boy?"

Norman Grant, in tail coat, opera cloak and top hat, stood beside me, looking more like the lonely and retired old actor than I had ever seen him before.

"Fleet Street," I said. "The *Sentinel's* London office."

"Ah, I see. I was about to suggest you might care to join me. It is past my bedtime, but I feel in the mood for company tonight. Still, if you're busy, my boy —"

"Isn't there going to be a party? Won't you be with Charley?"

"Mr. Silken has invited the cast to supper. But —" He shrugged. "Anyway, drinking champagne is no longer my particular forte."

"I shan't be very long at the office. If you wouldn't mind coming with me and —"

"May I do that, dear boy?" He sounded pathetically eager.

We started off.

"No doubt, you intend to inform your readers that a great actor has arrived." There was a faintly sardonic note in his tone. "And possibly you'll be right. I sincerely hope so."

"I don't think he could have done much better in the part, do you?"

"Ah no, not in the part. . . . But the part, laddie, might have been sent to him straight from Heaven."

He said no more. If he felt any elation over Charley's triumph, he was betraying none.

I left him in the waiting room, while I went to file my report. When I rejoined him he suggested we go to the Howard Hotel, where he was staying "on Mr. Silken's bounty," for our refreshment. He ordered sandwiches, a whisky and soda for me and a glass of hot milk for himself. There was an awkward silence. I felt that he was desperately anxious to talk to someone who knew Charley and of his relationship with Charley. But he seemed at a loss for words.

"Well," I said at last, with forced brightness, "I drink your health, sir. Tonight must have been almost as exciting an occasion for the master as it was for the pupil."

He glanced down at his steaming glass. "His first night, dear boy," he said dolefully. "My last night. Tomorrow I return to my hermitage."

"But not indefinitely. Charley will be sure to need your help again."

He shook his head. "No. You see, my boy, I have been — dismissed."

"What?" I sat upright. But my surprise was only momentary. "Well," I said, relaxing, "you warned me at the beginning he wouldn't be grateful."

"No, no, laddie, you mustn't accuse him of ingratitude. I am sure he will always acknowledge what little indebtedness he owes me. Do you know, he seriously offered me half his salary in perpetuity? Quixotic, you may say, and, of course, I declined, because teaching him has been my very great pleasure. Yet I believe that if I were to remind him of his promise, oh twenty years from now, he would honor it. He has a most generous heart."

"But a swollen head, apparently. I'm horrified that after all you've done for him he should just —"

"It isn't him, dear boy. It's his wife. He's completely under her thumb. I haven't been allowed near him since they got back from Oxford. She has done all the coaching she considered necessary."

"Well, that couldn't have been much," I said consolingly. "As you say, he has a perfect part. But I wouldn't mind betting, when he comes up against something more difficult, he'll find out for himself he can't get on without you."

"I'm delighted to hear you say that, laddie. But —" He took a sip or two of his milk. "Though I have no reason to like Miss Logan . . ."

"Nor I," I agreed enthusiastically. "I dare say you've heard about Jean Craven. She was my cousin and —"

"Yes, yes," he said, as if this were something that did not concern him. "A terrible business. But Miss Logan is no fool. She's aware that Charley lacks sufficient experience to play the great roles of tragedy. I doubt if I could have prevented him, after he's finished with Cupid, from rushing into some part that might well be beyond his present reach; that might easily wreck him. I think she *will* be

able to restrain him. In fact, I shall be surprised if she allows him to reappear in London at all until he's learned a good deal more than he knows now. She'll make him go back on tour."

"Oh, no," I said with conviction. "She's avaricious. She'll want to make hay while the sun shines."

"Well, we shall see." He smiled sadly, swallowed the rest of his milk, and put down the glass carefully. "Miss Renee Logan considers my methods old-fashioned."

He looked straight at me, and I saw how his pride had been hurt.

"And possibly she is right," he went on. "And yet — well, it stands to reason, does it not, that my knowledge and experience are greater than hers? I set our friend on the right path — there's no doubt of that. I can't help feeling I still have a lot to offer him."

"Of course," I mumbled.

"It's been good of you to listen to me. I'd looked forward to remaining Charles Stranleigh's counselor for the rest of my life. I'd built up my hopes on it. . . . Here, let me order you another drink?"

"No, thank you very much," I said, grateful for the opportunity to take my leave. "It's late. I really must be going."

He saw me to the front entrance of the hotel.

"Well, my boy," he said as we shook hands, "you see me on the verge of my second retirement."

"I'm returning to Manchester myself in the morning. I hope you'll allow me to call on you again."

Suddenly there were tears in his eyes. "Of course, dear boy. Please do. It will always be a great pleasure for me to see you."

As my cab drove off, I was warmed by a glow of satisfaction at having done a good deed in anticipation. I pictured myself going often to cheer the old man up, drinking his strongly brewed tea, listening to him talk about his own past and his star pupil's beginnings.

But youth is by far more generous in the promise than in the performance. Other matters occupied me when I got back to Man-

chester; I never called on Norman Grant. I was often going to, but I never did. . . . Two years later, I heard of his death.

Charley arranged a memorial service for him, which I covered for my paper. This handsome last tribute to his old tutor was written up as a characteristically generous gesture. I regarded it as a belated penance, for I assumed that he had taken no more notice of Norman Grant during the last two years of the latter's life than I had.

The service was held in the cathedral, and the large congregation included many celebrities of the stage. These people, like Charley himself, had come on a flying visit to Manchester; they would have to be back in London in time for their evening performances. It was probable that few if any of them cared a brass farthing about Norman Grant. But theater people are apt to be the slaves of their own fashion, and for them to be where Charley was and to do what Charley did was now to be in the mode. Renee Logan was notably absent. I supposed that, even by the standards of the stage, it would have been too hypocritical for her to pretend to honor Norman Grant's memory.

On my way from the cathedral I passed within a few feet of Charley. He was surrounded by friends. I should have liked to greet him, but I feared a reunion now might be embarrassing for both of us. Much had happened since we had had any communication with one another. I was still a little-known dramatic critic in the provinces; he was a famous actor. I felt that he would probably not be interested in meeting me again. I was even afraid he might snub me.

The run of *Cupid and Psyche* had lasted six months.

At the end of it, he and his wife had agreed to head a company that was to tour Canada, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand in a repertory of plays, predominantly Shakespearean.

Paragraphs appeared in the press, hinting that it was foolish of him not to capitalize on his huge initial success, and that, theatrical memory being notoriously short, he might well be forgotten by the

time he got back. He issued a statement in reply saying that, while he looked forward to playing many more parts in the West End, he had decided to do an overseas tour (*a*) because he believed the experience would be of inestimable value to him and (*b*) because he welcomed an opportunity "to see the world."

I surmised that Renee had concocted that statement for him, though the second part of it seemed to bear his own individual touch. I was certain that his decision had been made by her.

He was away just under a year. Though the public may have already forgotten him when he returned, the managers had not. "Charles Stranleigh, who will be remembered for his remarkable performance in *Cupid and Psyche*, is back in town and is being besieged with offers." At last came the announcement that he was to make his reappearance under the banner of Laurence Silken in a new production of *Romeo and Juliet*.

Judging from the notices, he scored a triumph no less sensational than that of his debut. A few of the critics even remarked that he was a much improved actor for his experience abroad, having gained "a certain self-assurance and command of the stage which previously he had lacked."

Romeo and Juliet ran for over three months, something of a record for a Shakespearean revival. Six weeks later, Charley made his third London appearance in a modern comedy called *The Brighton Way*. Once again he triumphed. While a minority of the critics, it is true, felt that his talents were being wasted in a play of small consequence, the majority reported rapturously that the man who had already proved himself a tragedian of real stature was in addition a born comedian. Good play or bad, the public flocked to see him in it. *The Brighton Way* had now been running several months, and its end was nowhere in sight.

He had become the best-advertised actor in England. Hardly a day passed without some mention of his name in the press, and many facts about his personal life were common knowledge: that he had no children; that he had joined the Garrick Club — a club for

amateurs of the stage, which welcomed professional actors only if they were both prominent and of unimpeachable moral stability; that he had recently moved his living quarters from the Regent's Park area to the Hammersmith Mall.

Evidently he was enjoying a considerable social success. Often I read that he and his wife had entertained such-and-such celebrated people or that they had been among the guests at such-and-such a fashionable gathering. Pictures of this young, famous and handsome couple at some week-end house party, or at the races, or, as most recently, at Lord's for the Eton and Harrow match appeared in the society magazines. Renee, I thought, looked more at ease in these pictures than Charley did. Though he seemed to wear his beautifully cut clothes with the careless grace of a gentleman bred, there was always something about his appearance that struck me as a little waxen.

His marriage was represented as a perfect one — combining the merits of a true love match and a rewarding professional partnership. Rarely was Charley to be seen anywhere, on or off the stage, without his actress wife, "the beautiful and talented Renee Logan."

From a personal point of view I still regretted that Charley had married Renee, and knew that I always should. Yet I had to admit to myself that Jean — gentle, unworldly Jean — could never have done for him what Renee had. Indeed, it was difficult to see how he could have served his career better than by marrying her when he did. And, after all, leaving sentiment out of it, what else mattered? What else had he been born for except to be a great actor, acclaimed as such?

A couple of days after the memorial service I happened to run into Jasper Blake at the Midland Hotel, and he asked me to have a drink with him.

During the past two years, I had not seen much of Jasper. We had little to talk about, for our common topic of complaining about Manchester life had long since lost its shine. Business, politics and

sport bored me; the theater and the arts bored him. I had never discussed with him the effect of Jean's death on my feelings for Charley, but Jasper had evidently assumed that I had no wish either to see the man or hear his name mentioned.

I was completely taken off guard, therefore, when, after we had lit cigarettes and toasted each other in sherry, Jasper remarked, "Our Charley boy was asking about you the other day."

He was eyeing me closely over his raised glass, evidently trying to decide how much further he dared go.

"You saw him at the memorial service?" I asked at last.

"No. I met him afterwards."

"Well," I said, forcing a smile, "it was good of the great man to inquire after me. What did he want to know?"

Jasper put down his glass of sherry and tilted back his chair. "He'd like to make it up."

"I haven't quarreled with him," I said stiffly.

"Look, Paul." He brought his chair to rest again. "I realize just how you must have felt. But after all a lot of water has passed under the bridge since then. Charley's genuinely attached to you, you know. He told me he'd never regretted anything so much as your dropping him."

"My *dropping* him!" I laughed. "Why, I haven't had so much as a line from him in more than two years. And besides, it's news to me that men in his position are dropped by their old friends. I thought they did the dropping."

"Well, of course, I don't know what the circumstances were exactly — but I can imagine he didn't feel like risking a rebuff."

It occurred to me that, though we had met by chance, Jasper's unexpected mention of Charley had not been spontaneous.

"By the way," I said, "I suppose Charley didn't authorize you to make this — approach?"

Jasper looked sheepish. "Oh no. That is, not exactly. As a matter of fact, he did ask me to make a point of giving you his love."

"His love!"

"Oh," he said somewhat embarrassedly, "you know how Charley talks. Just his way of saying 'no hard feelings.' Personally, I hope you'll drop in on him when you're next in town."

"No, I don't think there'd be much point."

"Well, it's up to you."

"It's not simply a question of Jean," I said the name with difficulty. "I doubt whether Charley and I would have much to say to one another now. I'm still what I was — more or less. But he must be a very different person. . . ."

"That's just where you're wrong, old man!" Jasper was suddenly most enthusiastic, as if this were something he'd been bursting to tell me. "He hasn't changed an atom. He's the same old Charley we used to know. When I read about the memorial service he was arranging for old what's-his-name, the tutor fellow, I thought it might be fun to see what sort of chap he'd turned into. On the spur of the moment, I wrote inviting him to have luncheon with me after the service. The very next day I got a telegram from him about a mile long. Must have cost him a small fortune. It began, 'Dear old Jasper,' and ended 'your old friend, Charley.' The gist of it was he couldn't lunch with me because he already had another engagement, but he'd be honored — I swear he said 'honored' — if I'd allow him to arrange for me to join his party."

He paused to offer me a cigarette, and light another for himself. I waited for him to continue.

"I let it go at that. But I began to have my doubts. I took him to mean he was lunching with some of his theatrical crowd. Well, you know *me* — I couldn't imagine myself fitting in with a bunch of actor fellows. I fancied I was going to have a very thin time of it. Now you'll never guess who we had lunch with in the end!"

"Lloyd George?" I said, mentioning the first famous man I could think of who might have been visiting Manchester and would have awed Jasper.

"No. The William Sandersons! You remember Bill Sanderson,

the chubby-faced clerk — the one Charley used to call 'his most esteemed colleague'?"

I remembered him, a little dimly, for I had not seen him since that farewell luncheon more than three years ago. I was surprised to learn that he, apparently, was the one person Charley had looked up on his first return visit to Manchester.

"I take it Bill Sanderson's married then?"

"Yes, to a girl remarkably like himself in appearance. Farm stock, I'd say. I suppose you'd call her buxom. Complexion too florid, but she has nice blue eyes. Bill's come up in the world since we knew him. He's a sort of assistant assistant sales manager. Dizzy heights for him. Anyway he and his missus have quite a nice little house of their own in Blackley — three rooms and a back yard, where they keep chickens."

"You had lunch there?"

"We did indeed. I met Charley as arranged. He looks the typical actor, I must admit. I always thought he could do with a haircut. Well now he wears his locks so long I ragged him about it. He didn't mind. He said if I were on the stage, I'd soon realize that a fellow has to dress his part — something like that. We had a couple of drinks — his idea, by the way — and then went off to the Sandersons. Cold buffet in the sitting room. Normally, I suppose, they eat in the kitchen. This was a special occasion."

The Sanderson home, I reflected, must be just the sort of "suburban nook" that Renee had once said Charley would make for Jean if he married her.

I finished my sherry. "You know, Jasper, I can quite see how it might strike most people as a charming gesture for Charley to honor a former fellow clerk with his company. But the whole thing sounds a little self-conscious to me. A sort of king's visit to one of the lowliest of his subjects."

"Oh, don't imagine that didn't occur to me, old man." He patted my arm forgivingly. "And I'll grant you our reception when we first walked into that little house was pretty painful. Bill was nervous

and looked as if he were all prepared to get down on his hands and knees and crawl. His wife — Eileen's her name — she was literally trembling with awe. But — well, you were the one who was always talking about old Charley's gift for making everyone feel at ease. It's just as much in evidence as it ever was. You know what he did, the moment we were inside the house? He clasped Eileen's red and roughened hand and gazed into her eyes, with that solemn air of his, as if he were meeting the girl of his dreams. Heaven knows how long he kept this up. I was expecting her to have an attack of the giggles at any moment. But I suppose she was too stunned. He was still gazing at her, when he said to Bill, 'Aye, lad. She's lovely and all. I always knew you were a man of taste.' Then he asked if he might kiss the bride. He didn't wait for permission. He promptly proceeded to do so."

"A perfect performance," I said, though I realized that this was just the sort of thing the Charley we'd both known might have done.

"Well, it certainly did the trick. Eileen was pretty puzzled, of course, never having met anyone remotely like him. But you could see the delight written all over Bill's face. He came up and gave his old pal a resounding slap on the back. 'Charley lad,' he said, 'you haven't changed woone bit.' After that, everything went swimmingly."

I was a little envious for I should like to have been present. "But what on earth did you talk about?" I asked.

"Oh, I can't remember exactly. Cricket — one thing and another. Bill and Charley swapped stories about their days together in the Northern Dyestuffs Company. I'd heard most of 'em before, of course, but I didn't mind hearing them again. Eileen fairly glowed with pride. Charley seemed to be enjoying himself. I may have an unusually simple and unsuspecting nature, Paul, old man, but I never once got the impression he was condescending. Anyway, there you are."

"Didn't Charley mention the theater at all?" I asked.

"Oh, he never used to say much about that when he was with

me," Jasper smiled. "That was one of the most delightful things about him — his readiness to adapt himself to his company. Of course the Sandersons asked him what it was 'like' to be a famous actor. He made the whole thing sound like a sort of *Arabian Nights* story; you know, like something that hadn't really happened to him at all or at any rate shouldn't have. He can still laugh at himself, thank heavens. But you'll really have to see him for yourself."

Suddenly, he looked at his watch again. "Good God," he exclaimed. "Start talking about Charley boy and one gets into his own worst habit. I must dash."

He left me regretful that I'd missed my chance of speaking to Charley. I did not entirely accept the idyllic picture he had painted because I thought him the type of man who would judge from appearances only. Still, he had persuaded me that I should have run no risk of being snubbed.

But I never followed up his suggestion of getting in touch with Charley, though I visited London several times during the next year and on each occasion toyed with the idea. I was afraid that seeing Charley would probably mean seeing Renee as well — and I still disliked that thought as much as ever. Besides, it seemed to me that if he really wanted to resume our friendship, it was for him to make the approach.

CHAPTER VII

IN JULY of 1913, I resigned my job in Manchester, and returned to live in London. I had had a play accepted by Angus Ross for production in the early autumn and I had sufficient savings to keep me in idleness for a year or more. I hoped for a post as a dramatic critic on one of the London papers.

My play was concerned with the young Thomas Wainewright, a minor figure of the Regency. He was artist, essayist and poisoner, though only in the last capacity did he win his small claim to immortality. The exact number of his victims has, I believe, never been determined. Some he poisoned because he wanted their money, others from more frivolous motives. For example, when asked by his friends later in his life why he had murdered his sister-in-law, he said the reason was that she had had "such thick ankles."

I suppose he might be made the subject of a psychologically profound drama. I treated him lightly, however, without attempting to probe his underlying emotional complexities. I stated the paradox, but left it unexplained, drawing Wainewright in his youth as merely a homicidal *flâneur*, a charming, romantic character who was nevertheless a murderer.

The play appealed to Angus Ross because of the chance it afforded for colorful decoration. He belonged to the Gordon Craig School, and was more interested in the pictorial than the dramatic or histrionic side of stage production. Ross had gone into management some eighteen months before, having previously been a character comedian known to West End audiences for what critics like to call "perfect little cameos." While his artistic reputation as a manager

already stood high, he was at a commercial disadvantage, for his theater was both small and off the beaten track. He could neither charge as high prices for seats as his West End rivals did nor take in as much money. This meant, in turn, that he could not ordinarily command the services of top-salaried actors.

Our negotiations had been conducted by correspondence, but shortly after my arrival in London I went to see him at his office, which was really just a tiny room. A few original costume designs in frames were hung on its whitewashed walls, and its floor space was nearly filled by a round table and four or five upright wooden chairs.

Ross, in his late forties, was podgy, moon-faced and balding slightly. His business manager was with him: a tall, spare, serious-looking man, named Arnold Fraser. After greetings and introductions were over, the three of us sat down at the table.

"Tell me, Hunter," Ross asked me abruptly, "do you happen to *know* any artist or writer who goes in for poisoning people?"

I brushed his question aside with a modest laugh.

"Then I honestly don't see how we're ever going to find a Wainwright for you," he said cheerfully.

I was taken aback. I hadn't given any serious thought to casting problems, for I had assumed that I wouldn't even be consulted.

"I still believe Dawson could do it," Fraser intervened, mentioning a fairly well-known juvenile.

Ross pursed his lips, then turned to me. "What's your opinion of Dawson?"

"Well, I've only seen him once, but frankly he struck me as a little insipid."

"There you are, Fraser." He beamed. "The author agrees with me."

"But you said yourself a moment ago you couldn't think of anyone better," Fraser protested.

There was a silence, while Arnold Fraser appeared to be racking his brains anew. "Leslie Taylor," he said at last — and added bluster-

ingly, as Ross fixed him with a critical stare: "He's a perfectly capable actor."

Again, Ross turned to me.

"I'm afraid I've never heard of him," I said.

"Oh, he's a big heavy fellow with a loud, raucous voice."

"He doesn't sound quite the right type."

"No. We might just as well go out and engage the nearest coal heaver, what?"

"Well, think of someone better yourself," Fraser said.

"I wonder —" I began hesitantly.

"Yes?" Ross encouraged me.

"Would Frank Messenger be any good? He has the appearance for it certainly and the . . ."

"Much too effeminate," Fraser muttered.

"I'm afraid I rather agree with that, Hunter," Ross said crushingly. "Messenger would make a very ladylike murderer, you know."

So it went on for the better part of an hour. Ross seemed to be seeking advice from Fraser and me merely for the pleasure of rejecting it. At length we became silent through exhaustion. Ross got up; his hands in his trouser pockets, he began to wander round the edge of the room, occasionally pausing to look at one of the pictures on the wall, as though he were viewing it for the first time. Then he came to a decisive halt by my chair.

"Suppose, Hunter," he said, "you could have your pick of all the actors in London?"

"Including stars?" I asked hopefully. I had not mentioned the one actor whom I believed ideal for the part because I assumed the suggestion would be financially quite impractical.

"Including Tree, Hare, Alexander, Du Maurier — anyone you like."

"Well," I began, feeling my way, "I don't know —"

"Don't know!" He pounced on the words, before I could qualify them. "Then I obviously understand your play better than you do yourself. It might have been written for Charles Stranleigh."

It had not been, at least not consciously. But I agreed with Ross. Charley was probably the only actor alive who could retain an audience's sympathy for Wainewright. I had never imagined Ross would consider him.

Ross turned to Fraser gleefully. "Stranleigh wouldn't be so dusty, would he?"

"He'd be perfect. But you couldn't possibly get him."

"Why not?"

"He's already working, for one thing."

"His play's a frost."

That I imagined was the truth. Following the phenomenally long run of *The Brighton Way*, Charley had scored another, though rather pallid, success in a Shakespearean revival — as Coriolanus. Then, a few weeks ago, he had opened in a modern drama and, to judge from the notices, had failed badly for the first time. Most of the critics had said he should never have consented to play such a part. A few of them had been less charitable.

"Well, even if he did happen to be free," Fraser said, "how could you afford him?"

"We might get him cheap."

Fraser removed the pince-nez he was wearing and blinked. "All right. I'll try him if you like."

I was tempted to boast of my former friendship with Charley. But if I did so, Ross might suggest I ask Charley as a personal favor to accept the part. That was something I knew I would never do.

"Might as well try him at once," Fraser said, making his way round the table to the telephone on the back wall.

"Don't tell him what it is we want to talk to him about," Ross said. "Just make an appointment for me to see him."

Fraser asked for the number. Ross started to move round the room again, and I was on my feet. I was excited.

"Even if we do get him," Fraser said, covering the mouthpiece with his hand, "he'll probably be more trouble than he's worth. You're bound to have difficulties with him."

"Really, Fraser!" Ross cut him short. He came up and slapped me on the back. "Gloomy fellow, Fraser, I'm afraid — always hoping for the worst. I'm surrounded by pessimists in this place."

He took my arm. "However," he said, piloting me politely but irresistibly towards the door, "somehow I'm pretty sure I'll be able to get Stranleigh for you. I'll let you know."

Having seen me out of the office, he closed the door again just as Fraser was saying, "Could I speak to Mr. Stranleigh, please?"

Three days later, though I had heard not a word from Ross meanwhile, I received a letter which I found as encouraging as it was wholly unexpected.

MY DEAR PAUL,

Why don't you call round here, if you have nothing better to do, tomorrow (Wednesday) at 4:30, and let's have a talk about your clever and charming little play.

Yours sincerely,

RENEE STRANLEIGH

I assumed Ross had offered Charley the part and that Charley wished to see me. I thought it surprising that he should have got his wife to approach me instead of doing so himself. What puzzled me more was that Renee, whom I had never known well, should write so informally and address me by my Christian name. I could think of only one explanation: that Charley had persuaded her to look upon me as a great friend by marriage, as it were.

I was glad that she herself evidently liked my play. Though she had not appeared with Charley in *Coriolanus* and was not now acting with him, I assumed she was still the dominant influence in his career. To persuade her that Charley should accept would be to persuade him also. Much as I disliked her personally, I could not afford to ignore her invitation.

As I rang the doorbell of the much advertised Queen Anne house

on the Hammersmith Mall, I was full of dread at meeting her again and of remeeting Charley in her presence. A smartly turned out parlormaid showed me up to the large drawing room, extravagantly furnished with correct period pieces and a grand piano. Renee was sitting at the far end by the window, which overlooked the front garden behind its iron railings. She had two people with her, a man and a woman. There was no sign of Charley.

She came forward to greet me, her lips parted in that glittering smile I remembered well. But it struck me at once that she was no longer a girl. She was still handsome, but she had grown almost stout and had aged more than one might expect in five years. Actually she could not have been much over twenty-eight; she looked a good thirty-five.

"How are you, Paul, after all these years?" she said, with the artificial warmth of a practiced hostess. "Come and meet these people."

Her friends had both got to their feet. As we approached them, I must unconsciously have been searching for Charley, for suddenly Renee uttered a small, shrill laugh. "Oh, he's not hiding under the sofa," she said banteringly. She was clearly delighted at having made me uncomfortable.

Her friends were evidently the last survivors of a luncheon party, for I noticed that a tray bearing coffee and liqueurs had been left on top of the grand piano; and there were a number of used cups and glasses standing about.

The man, so I gathered from Renee's introduction, was an official of the Austrian Embassy in London. I recall little about him, except that he was middle-aged and wore a monocle. The woman — she must have been twenty-six or -seven at this time — was Lise Stael, the German pianist, whom I already knew by reputation. She had come to London some three years ago, and it was said intended to make her home in England, where she was doing extremely well, both professionally and socially. She had pretty blond hair and blue eyes, her clothes were well chosen, and she carried herself with the

poise of a true beauty. But her figure was inclined to dumpiness, her face, with its slightly jutting-out chin, was strong, not delicate, and she had broad, graceless hands. There was about her whole appearance a suggestion of the peasant girl *exaltée*.

"So this is our clever young dramatist!" she said. She evidently expected from me a witty or provocative or clever remark. I was unable to oblige.

"Charley has a matinee," Renee said, "but I'm sure he'll hurry home, because he's expecting you."

She exchanged a swift glance with Lise. It was quite apparent that she was making fun of me and must have prepared the other two to enjoy the joke. I could not guess what she had said to them about me or what the joke was.

"Well, Renee my dear," Lise said, speaking grammatically but with an unmistakable German accent, "it's been a great pleasure to shake hands with our new dramatist, but now I really must be going." She turned to the Austrian. "What time is it?"

"Quarter to five," he told her.

"Quarter to five. My goodness. To be invited to luncheon and stay till quarter to five! That is barbaric. Good-by," she said extending her hand to me. "I hope you have a *succès fou* with your play. I'm sure you will. Renee adores it."

She moved away, the Austrian at her heels. "Good-by, Renee darling," she said, blowing her hostess a kiss. "Remember me to your beautiful Charley."

Renee insisted on seeing them down, and it was nearly a quarter of an hour before she reappeared. I had been wondering fretfully what on earth the joke could be that she and her friends had shared at my expense.

She came in hurriedly. Her cheeks were flushed, and there was a feverish glint in her dark eyes. "No, don't get up, Paul," she said, with a commanding wave of her hand. "I'm afraid I forgot you'd want tea. If you don't mind waiting for it, I'll tell them to bring you some." Her hand was on the bell.

"Oh, I can survive without tea, for once."

"Just as you like." She shrugged her shoulders, then sauntered over to the grand piano.

"Would you care for a glass of brandy instead?"

"Oh, no, thank you very much. Not just now."

She picked up the brandy decanter from the tray and poured out a generous measure into a balloon glass. "I have a dreadful headache," she said.

She put the glass down empty and came and sat beside me on the sofa. "We were going to talk about your play, weren't we?"

"Yes," I said. "I gather you don't dislike it."

She had been looking at me with a sort of teasing smile on her lips. Now, giving a little laugh, she averted her eyes. "Oh, I think it's charming, charming. A little amateurish in places, of course. But those are faults which can easily be corrected in rehearsal. What made you send it to Angus Ross?"

"Well —"

"Oh, he'll probably do it very well," she said, in the manner of a teacher addressing a pupil. "He's apt to be careless and naughty sometimes, dear Angus. But he has ten times more imagination than the majority of producers. The trouble is he can't afford to pay his actors enough."

She began drumming her fingers on the back rest of the sofa. "Does Charley like the play?" I asked.

"He'll tell you he adores it," she said with a studied offhandedness.

"You mean he doesn't really?"

"My dear man, I doubt if he's read it. It wouldn't make any difference if he had. He'd still have no idea whether it was good, bad or indifferent. Besides, you know yourself he's absurdly sentimental — especially where you're concerned. He'd agree to act in your play for tuppence halfpenny a week. Fortunately, I'm here to look after his interests."

I decided it would be prudent to hold my tongue. She got up,

moved swiftly to the grand piano, hesitated an instant, then sat down on the piano stool, facing me. Clearly she was agitated.

She said sharply, "I've no doubt you'll try your best to persuade Charley —"

"Well, it might be worth his while — even if it does mean some financial sacrifice. After all, it's a wonderful part for him."

"As a matter of fact," she broke in, abruptly resuming her teacher's manner, "you may be right. He needs a chance to sweep the critics off their feet after the dreadful notices they gave him in the piece of nonsense he's doing now. Under the circumstances he might make a worse move. But, of course, you must understand, Paul," she added, and now her tone was acid, "my only concern is what's best for Charley's career. I've no intention of letting him turn himself into a philanthropic institution for any of his friends who happen to be aspiring dramatists."

I managed to choke back a retort. She must know quite well that I could not afford to quarrel with her, and from the first have set out to be as offensive as possible, exulting in her power over me and deliberately tempting me to lose my temper. I could not imagine why she should wish to be so vindictive unless it was that she identified me in her mind with Jean and still regarded Jean as a rival.

She had poured herself another glass of brandy. Perhaps, I reconsidered, she really *was* suffering from a headache, and was simply bad-tempered.

Her next remark seemed to confirm this. "Forgive me for speaking so bluntly," she said, finishing her drink. "I'm not feeling well enough to be tactful."

"Oh, I quite understand. I take it, you're in favor of Charley's doing the part?"

"That depends," she came and sat down beside me again. "I asked you to come early because I wanted to talk to you alone. That's part of our secret, by the way."

"Our secret?"

She treated me to another glittering smile. "Yes, I'd prefer this conversation to be kept strictly between ourselves. Is that understood?"

"Of course."

"Tell me," she said, and her manner now was almost ingratiating. "Who had you thought of for the leading lady?"

"Well, no one really. I mean I've only discussed casting with Ross once, and then we didn't get further than Wainewright."

"But you must have some idea."

I jumped to the conclusion that she was suggesting herself for the part. She wouldn't be right for it, but it would be better to let her play it than do without Charley. Anyway, the final decision would be up to Ross.

I turned to her slowly. "As a matter of fact, I've been wondering whether you —"

She burst out laughing. "Oh, my poor young man, you needn't bother to be as gallant as all that!"

"But I mean it," I persisted with awkward bravado. "I think you'd be excellent."

She started laughing again, more shrilly than before. It struck me she was almost hysterical.

"You may be a writer, Paul," she managed to say at length, "but you're not very observant, are you? My dear man, look at me!" She got up and stood directly in front of me. "Can't you see why it would be impossible for me to appear in your play? Or in any play?" She walked away, satisfied that she had said enough to make even me understand.

She had. Apparently she was pregnant.

She sat down at the piano, and began striking a few aimless chords. "As a matter of fact, I can tell you who Angus has suggested for the part."

"Oh?"

"Kitty Lane." She struck another chord or two. "Do you know her work?"

"No. I don't think I've ever seen her."

"There's no earthly reason why you should have."

"Do you think she'd be right?"

"I know she'd ruin your play." She swung round on the piano stool and glared at me. It was as if she had delivered an ultimatum.

"So what do you propose to do?" she said.

But she didn't wait for my reply.

"Here's what you *must* do." Her words came quickly, almost breathlessly. "The girl's absolutely out of the question as far as I'm concerned. But Angus will probably insist and Charley won't fight him. Charley won't understand how utterly hopeless the girl would be, and besides he's so ridiculously softhearted he can't bear doing anyone out of a job. So it's up to you —"

"But why should Ross insist," I interrupted, "if she's as unsuitable as you say?"

"Oh, my dear man, you're in the theater now. For Heaven's sake, try to be a little less innocent!" She flung the words at me. She was striding about the room, gesticulating wildly in the manner of a distraught tragedienne. "I *must* have your assurance that you'll refuse to have that girl play the part."

"Well, naturally, if I'm convinced she'd be no good —"

"I tell you, there's no doubt about that!"

"Then, of course, I'll protest."

She came to a halt in the middle of the room. Her eyes were aflame. "What do you mean by that exactly?"

"Well — what I say. I haven't the power, unfortunately, to give Ross orders."

"Would you threaten to withdraw the play?"

"I don't see how I could. After all, I've signed a contract and it doesn't allow me any right to interfere in production arrangements."

"You really are a spineless creature. I hoped you might have grown up a bit in the past five years."

"If growing up means learning to dishonor one's agreements —" I said, my temper at last getting the better of me.

"Very well! Very well!" she almost screamed. "Let your play be ruined! Don't lift a finger to stop Ross from engaging his — little friend! Why should I care? Only I warn you if Kitty Lane is leading lady, Charley won't be leading man. I'll never consent to his appearing in such a travesty. Never! Do you understand?"

She seemed to have lost all control. She was launched on a tirade which I feared would end in hysteria unless I could calm her down first. I was searching desperately for the right thing to say, when the door opened, and Charley walked into the room.

His eyes as well as his mouth were smiling as he came up and clasped my right hand with both of his, and then slapped my back affectionately. "My dear old Paul — after all these years! You don't look a day older!"

Neither did he. On the contrary, he seemed to have gained in luster.

"You're a dark horse, aren't you, Paul?" he said. "Writing a play behind my back. . . . Why didn't you send it directly to me in the first place? I'd have been delighted to put it on as my own first venture into management. You're a born dramatist, my dear fellow." He turned to Renee, whose presence up to now he had not so much as acknowledged. "I've always said, haven't I, darling, that old Paul was wasting his talents as a critic?"

She had sat down in an armchair by the fireplace. He went up to her now, and kissed her on the cheek. It struck me that this was a formality which gave neither of them pleasure.

My play, he said, was magnificent. I was a writer hungry for praise, so I pressed him to go into detail. Which scene did he consider the most effective? Oh, he could not possibly say; they were all captivating. What did he think of Helen? Helen? Yes, the heroine. Oh, of course. Charming! done, my dear fellow, delightful!

I realized then that Charley was expressing admiration for a play he had hardly bothered to read. It was just as Renee had predicted.

Charley suggested opening a bottle of champagne to celebrate our reunion. Renee agreed enthusiastically and rang for the maid. That was the only sign of enjoyment on her part during the half hour the three of us were together. For the rest of the time her manner was frigid, and Charley's gallant efforts to create a festive atmosphere were all in vain.

At one point, when the conversation was running dry, he asked me how long I had been waiting before he came in. Renee shot me a warning glance. I lied, and told him only a few minutes. I knew now that theirs was not a marriage of perfect harmony, but I was still convinced that she had great influence over him and that he would not be able to play Wainewright unless she agreed.

After the champagne was finished, Charley said that of course I would "stay and have a bite with them."

"I'm afraid," Renee started to object, intimating that there was not enough food in the house or something of that kind.

"All right," Charley broke in, "let's take old Paul *out* to dinner."

"You two go," Renee said. "I'll stay here."

"Oh, but you must come, darling."

"My dear Charley, you know perfectly well why I don't want to go out." Her tone suggested irritation and wounded feelings. "So what's the point of trying to force me? Besides, I'm sure you and Paul would *much* prefer to be by yourselves."

There was an evident sting in this, but he chose to ignore it. "Very well, darling." He moved towards the door. "Come along, Paul. I have to be back at the theater by eight, so we haven't much time."

I paused to say good-by to Renee. She shook hands with me, but seemed barely conscious of the fact while she was doing so. "Are you coming home tonight?" she called to Charley bitinglly. Her question amazed me, but it appeared to annoy rather than surprise him. "Naturally," he replied reprovingly.

We got into a private limousine, and presently a chauffeur appeared to take the wheel. Charley remained the formal, cultivated host — gracious and full of assumed charm. He was manifestly at pains to show off his grandeur and to prove to me how well it suited him to have become a man of wealth and consequence. "To the Garrick Club, please, Thomas," he said into the speaking tube, with a nice blending of courtesy and hauteur. This struck me as so essentially theatrical, coming from him, that I wanted to laugh. He betrayed no amusement. An actor playing a part must not smile at his own antics, if he intends them to be taken seriously.

For that was what he was doing, I decided — playing a part for my especial benefit. He played it well, but I had the impression that it put him under something of a strain, that it was a part he felt obligated to play. I detected in it, too, an element of pathos, the pathos of comedy.

He acknowledged the greetings of his fellow members, after we had arrived at the club, with an off-duty regality, and introduced me to a selected few as his "old and very dear friend." He ordered dinner in the ritualistic fashion of a life-long gourmet, tactfully suggesting what I might like to eat or drink, advising me that *galantine de veau* was "the chef's *pièce de résistance*," assuring me that I would find the Pontet Canet, 1892, "an agreeable and not too heavy wine."

There was little conversation during dinner. When the savory had been cleared away and coffee served, it was already quarter to eight and time for him to leave, I thought.

"The club port is quite tolerable," he said. "Would you care to try a glass?"

"Yes, but oughtn't you to be going? I don't want to make you late."

"My dear fellow, I have no need to rush. It's only a step from here to the theater. Let us finish our meal in a civilized fashion. Jenkins!" He summoned the wine steward.

"It's not so bad, is it?" he inquired solicitously after I had taken my first sip.

"Listen, Charley," I said, "I hope Renee's not going to think I dragged you out to dinner. She seemed upset when we left."

"Ah, dear Renee!" he said, and there was no modification of his manner. "I'm afraid she was a little —" he paused for a moment, his glass of port to his lips — "drunk."

"Charley!" I was horrified. In the year 1913 this was not a common accusation to hear made against a woman in Renee's social position — and certainly not by the woman's own husband.

He brushed the tablecloth lightly with the back of his hand. "I hope I haven't shocked you."

I didn't reply. He had shocked me because I hardly believed him. Admittedly, Renee had drunk quite a bit in my presence; it was possible that she had been drinking before my arrival. Her behavior, too, had certainly struck me as abnormal. But she had seemed in full possession of her faculties.

"I'm not surprised you don't believe me, Paul," he said dispassionately. "But I can assure you there's no doubt about it. You see, Renee is unfortunately a practiced drinker. When she takes too much she doesn't show it, in the same way as people who get drunk only occasionally. To a stranger she may appear quite reasonable. But not, I fear, to someone who knows her as well as I do. I can tell from her eyes."

He looked at me steadily, and I had no doubt now he was speaking the truth, baffling though I found it. A second or two passed before I realized its full significance, and then I exclaimed involuntarily, "Surely you don't mean that she . . . ?" I got no further, for I was arrested by the thought that this was a question too delicate to be asked.

"Yes, Paul, I do mean that." He glanced round to make sure that we could not be overheard. "Perhaps she is not what you would call a chronic drunkard," he continued. "But she drinks too much very often and it has the effect of changing her whole nature. Living

with her is a little trying, as you may imagine. To be honest, the only times I find my married estate bearable are when I follow her example and drink too much myself. Then we are fiends together." He gave a little laugh, suggesting that this was an exaggeration because he never really drank too much himself. "If we're to see a lot of you — as I trust we are — you're bound to notice that Renee's behavior is rather odd at times. It's better for you to know the truth. And besides there's no reason why I shouldn't tell you, is there? Considering that you're one of my oldest friends? I hope you agree with that, Paul."

He spoke without apparent emotion. But, imperceptibly, he had shed his pose. He was no longer the actor trying to create a calculated effect. His manner was in a sense highly artificial, but behind it the human being was plainly visible. I thought that, after all, Jasper Blake was right. Charley had acquired new trappings, but, these aside, he had not changed. He was still the same man of natural dignity, of essential simplicity, of fundamental helplessness who had so enchanted us.

I forgave him his recent display of affectation, because I now saw it as a shield bravely if childishly wielded. He was asking for my sympathy and somehow, despite all I had to blame him for, I could not withhold it.

For a while we sipped our port in silence.

"How long" — I asked at last — "how long has this been going on?"

"I suppose since I've known her she's had the tendency. But it's got much worse lately. She's been forced to give up the stage."

"Can't you stop her?"

He shook his head gravely. "It's useless trying."

"But something must be done," I said. "I mean apart from her own peace of mind and yours, she just can't be allowed to go on like this — undermining her health physically and mentally. In her present condition it might so easily end in a real tragedy for both of you."

He raised his eyebrows a little, and smiled sadly. "Did she tell you she was going to have a baby?"

"No," I said hastily, realizing that I had inadvertently put myself in danger of breaking her confidence. "But, looking at her, it was easy enough to guess."

"She would be overjoyed to hear you say that."

"Then she wants the child? In that case, I should have thought that —"

"She may want a child," he cut me short. "But she refuses to do anything about having one. You see, my dear Paul, if you will forgive such an intimate confession, though Renee and I are still legally tied we have been sexually divorced for as long as we've been married. At her wish, of course, not mine."

"You mean to tell me she *isn't* pregnant?"

"She isn't. But she has a habit of boasting that she is when she's had too much to drink. That's why I thought she might have told you. Perhaps, with your knowledge of psychology, you can suggest a reason why. I have an idea she must be ashamed that drinking has made her grow so fat. Don't you think that's possible?"

My sympathy for him became even more acute, but I could think of nothing to say. My thoughts were confused. This, let me repeat, was 1913. It was reassuring to look round and observe the Garrick Club dining room. In this stately and history-laden atmosphere Charley's wretchedly unstable and neurotic home life seemed mercifully remote.

I noticed the clock on the wall. "Charley, do you realize it's past eight o'clock?"

"Is it?" he said, getting to his feet, but apparently unperturbed. "I suppose I oughtn't to keep my public waiting — if I have any tonight." He finished his glass of port standing up.

"Paul," he said, smiling a little mischievously, as we went out, "I have rather a horrible suggestion to make. Would you care to see the play? It's not exactly the biggest success in town, and you may find sitting through it a somewhat lonely as well as a painful ordeal.

So if you'd prefer to do something else, I shan't be in the least offended."

"No, I'd like to see it."

"You're a beautiful liar, Paul," he said, holding the door open for me. "But I'll take you at your word."

We walked the few hundred yards to his theater. He did not mention Renee again, but it seemed as if something which had previously impeded the natural resumption of our friendship was now removed. He chatted away quite effortlessly.

We parted at the head of the passageway leading to the stage door. He handed me a card, and told me to present it at the box office for a free seat. "Let us meet again very soon," he said shaking hands. "I've missed you, you know. I'm so glad you thought of me for Wainewright."

I took him to mean from this that he did not expect me to go behind afterwards. That was just as well, for I should not have been able to congratulate him with any sincerity. I judged from his performance that he had given up trying, and the play I thought was even more dismal than the critics had suggested.

There was one reason, however, why from my point of view it was worth seeing. A small but quite effective part was played by a girl who struck me as exceptionally pretty and a talented actress. The girl's name was Kitty Lane.

As I lay in bed thinking about this, I reached a conclusion that surprised me no less than all the other disturbing facts I had unearthed in Charley's life during the past few hours. Plainly Renee had lost control of her husband's career; he would agree to do Wainewright irrespective of her wishes or of any conditions she might try to impose. Her effort to persuade me differently was a ludicrous and rather pathetic pretense inspired in part by vanity, but mostly by jealousy. Its purpose was clear enough. But she must have been drunk indeed ever to suppose it could succeed or that even I could remain long deceived by it.

CHAPTER VIII

ANGUS Ross telephoned me late next morning.

"Well, you're a nice fellow, I must say! Never telling me that Stranleigh was an old friend of yours. The grossest deception."

"I was afraid of being asked to use undue influence," I said.

"Anyway, we've got him. The contract's signed."

"I hope Charley didn't want too much money?"

"We offered him half his usual salary plus a percentage of the profits. He accepted without a murmur — apparently because of you. Now about the rest of the cast — Stranleigh wants a girl for Helen who's playing with him at present. She hasn't got much of a name. But I don't think she'd be at all bad."

"Charley wants her?" I suppose there must have been a clear insinuation in the way I said this.

"Well, that doesn't damn her outright."

"No, of course not. But —"

"We'd have a devil of a time finding anyone who wasn't, hadn't been, or wouldn't like to be Stranleigh's mistress."

"I wasn't suggesting —"

"Even if we gave up looking for a professional actress and started looking for a professional aristocrat instead, what?" He chuckled delightedly at the other end of the wire.

"And anyway," he resumed with mock severity, "you shouldn't listen to greenroom gossip, Hunter. It's a bad habit for a young dramatist to get into. All we have to decide is, Would this girl be any good or wouldn't she? Fraser naturally thinks she would, because she's what he calls 'dirt cheap.' I want your unbiased opinion. Her name's Kitty Lane —"

"Well, as a matter of fact, I saw Charley's play last night —"

"Did you notice the girl?"

"Yes, I did. She'd look right for Helen. And it seems to me she could act it."

"You're a professional judge, aren't you, Hunter? On your own head be it, then! Look in this afternoon, and we'll talk about the rest of the casting. I want to start rehearsals on Monday week. We open in a month from then."

Very shortly after Ross had rung off, I had a call from Charley. Did I know that he had just signed his contract to appear in my play? Yes, and I had been delighted to hear it. Was I by any chance free to have luncheon with him? There was something he wished to discuss with me "rather urgently."

We met at a chophouse in the Strand. He apologized for not taking me "somewhere gayer," but the trouble was if one went to the Savoy Grill or a place of that kind one was likely to run into so many of one's friends. "And I wanted to have a quiet talk with you, Paul."

He spent most of the time discussing Renee. He feared that he might have given me the wrong impression last evening. He did not blame her; he felt sorry for her, because she was "a very unhappy woman." He wished there were something he could do to make her life less of a burden to her. He realized that he was deeply in her debt. Though she had never been a wife to him in the true sense and though — he admitted this was a bitter disappointment — she would never bear him any family, he owed his "social education" to her and a good part of his theatrical education as well. "I would never be where I am today but for Renee," he said. "You are one of the very few people on earth, Paul, to whom I'd have breathed a word."

I was thinking that with Jean, even though his career might not have prospered so well, he would have found greater personal happiness than with the luckless, abnormal woman he had married instead. I wondered whether he was burdened with regret, as well

as with remorse, for having destroyed Jean who had loved him so selflessly.

"Charley," I said, "if this is none of my business, say so. But it's something I've never been able to understand. Why on earth did you marry Renee in the first place?"

He turned to me with a disarming smile on his lips. "I suppose, Paul," he said without a trace of braggadocio, "because she asked me to."

I wondered whether he intended this as a joke, a snub or a mere evasion. Then he added, "Besides, she was extraordinarily beautiful. She had lovely eyes. She still is a very handsome woman, don't you think?"

I felt certain then that as long as he lived he would never mention Jean's name to me again. His reply had done nothing to satisfy my curiosity, but at least it had come well from the actor who was to play Wainewright!

After luncheon, I told him that I was going to call on Ross. He walked with me as far as the tube station.

"Paul — you old ingrate," he cried just as we were parting, "do you realize you haven't said one word about that play I sent you to see last night?"

"Well, as a matter of fact —"

He put a finger to his lips. "Hush, Paul. James Barrie has wisely observed that anyone who begins a sentence like that is about to tell a whopper. I am fully aware that the play is appalling and that I do it ample justice."

He laughed, and I joined in with relief.

"But I wonder if you agree with me that there's one redeeming feature?"

He looked at me hopefully, but I refused to bite.

"The child who has that big scene in the second act. Do you happen to remember her? Or were you asleep?"

"Oh, you mean Kitty Lane," I said. "Yes, of course I remember her. I thought she was very good."

He swung his walking stick, and hit a piece of old newspaper that was lying on the pavement. "She's a rather appealing little person, Paul. I think she deserves a real chance. I happened to mention her to Angus Ross as a possibility for the heroine in your play, and he jumped at the idea. But I hope this isn't going to embarrass you, my dear fellow. I mean I wouldn't like to think I'd influenced Ross to make a choice you disapprove of."

"Don't worry, Charley; Ross asked me about it this morning and I gave it my blessing."

"Ah, I'm glad," he said. He lifted his stick in a kind of farewell salute, and walked slowly away.

I was convinced that Charley was having a love affair with Kitty Lane, whether or not he was as promiscuous as Ross had hinted. I thought it perfectly understandable that he should be unfaithful to a wife like Renee.

But during the month that followed, when I saw him with Kitty nearly every day (for I attended rehearsals regularly), I began to doubt that she *was* his mistress. There were times when he seemed hardly aware of her existence. There were other times, admittedly, when he was excessively attentive, but so he was to the other ladies of the company, young and old. All of them he called "dearest" or "darling" or "sweetheart" or "my love"; all of them he kissed or fondled, in his own courtly fashion, whenever the fancy took him. This impersonally amorous attitude had become a professional habit with him, a part of his stock-in-trade. Indeed in his more forgetful moods he would address Ross or the male members of the cast, even the stage hands, by such terms of endearment. He could not have found much opportunity to be with Kitty outside the theater. Every evening after rehearsals his chauffeur fetched him in the car and, so far as I knew, drove him straight home to Renee. Once or twice he took Kitty out to lunch, but he took other members of the company out to lunch also.

Kitty turned out to be extraordinarily stupid, and her looks, so

appealing on the stage, were disappointingly vapid close-to. Unfortunately, she liked to talk. True, she was overawed by Charley. Lover or not, she plainly looked upon him as the kind and powerful patron who had got her her present job, and in his presence she simpered sweetly and treated him with doglike devotion. Away from his dazzling influence she became immediately conscious of her position as a leading lady.

Her one redeeming quality was her professional competence. On the stage she was able to transform her silly voice and doll-like face into instruments for subtle characterization and genuine emotion. As James Agate has observed, only bad actors need brains. Kitty Lane had no more powers of reasoning than a cat, and, like a cat, she was vain, craved admiration, and, as long as she was up on the stage, had the instinctive ability to attract it.

At the opening rehearsal, she read her part abominably, leaving me convinced that she neither understood it nor had the least feeling for it. By the fourth rehearsal I was near despair. Ross, who had been pacing up and down the center aisle, pausing occasionally to watch one of Kitty's love scenes with Charley, sat down beside me.

"Well, what do you think of her?" he whispered.

"Couldn't you possibly get rid of her?" I replied.

"Oh, she'll be all right," he said calmly, and looked away from me.

I thought Ross must be mad to imagine this girl would ever be any good. She would ruin every scene in which she appeared. She would spoil the effect of Charley's superb performance.

Ross got up, and plucked me by the sleeve. He crept stealthily out of the auditorium, and I followed him. At the foot of the red-carpeted stairway that led to the theater foyer, he halted.

"Now, Hunter," he said, "I'm going to tell you the difference between your leading man and your leading lady. Neither of them understands what your play's all about, of course —"

"She certainly doesn't," I remarked bitterly.

He chuckled. "I doubt whether he could pass an examination on it. He's an odd chap. A great deal here obviously." He indicated his

heart. "But not much here, I should say." He touched his forehead.

"At least he speaks his lines as if he knew what they meant." I could not conceal my irritation. "As far as I'm concerned, he's perfect, whereas the girl's so dreadful —"

"No, Hunter," he said, waving an admonishing finger at me, "you're wrong. The only difference between them is that he has a wife with social ambitions — and she hasn't. He understands how to play the aristocrat, because Renee's taught him. Whereas our little Kitty — well, if I left her to her own devices she'd probably end up giving a performance like some servant girl masquerading as a duchess." He took my arm, and began walking me back to the auditorium. "But," he whispered, as we passed through the curtained entrance, "I shan't leave her to her own devices. I'll be Mrs. Stranleigh to her, Hunter. You wait and see."

At the end of another week, I was convinced that we should have been hard put to it to find a better Helen.

By then Charley was worrying me. From the beginning I had been delighted with his interpretation of Wainewright, and I had no complaint to make of him when he was actually engaged in a scene. But I was shocked by his attitude, for he showed none of that dedication to his work which I expected of all actors worth their salt.

The others connected with the production, in however humble a capacity, were clearly absorbed in it. They spoke and presumably thought of little else besides; but not Charley. He left promptly in the evenings, and never once stayed behind to talk things over with Ross or me. In the mornings, he was habitually late, frequently more than an hour so.

His habit of being out of earshot when he was needed on the stage was infuriating. Many times a scene would come to a halt because he had missed his entrance. "What's the trouble?" Ross would yell from the stalls. "Why don't you get on with it?" The stage manager would step forward. "Sorry, sir, he was here a minute ago." "Well, find him!" Ross would order wearily. Whereupon the stage manager would proceed to get hoarse shouting, "Mr. Stranleigh, please! Mr.

Stranleigh!" Eventually, the assistant stage manager would find Charley mooning at the back of the gallery or idly inspecting the dressing-room accommodation or talking to the stage-door keeper, or, as once happened, engaged in an earnest discussion about cricket prospects with the commissionaire at the front entrance. He would reappear on the stage unruffled, but apologetic and ready with an excuse. "I'm extremely sorry, my dear," he might say, addressing Ross, "but I understood you wished to do that other scene first." Then, turning to the actors and stage staff, he might add, "Please forgive me, ladies and gentlemen." They always did, though often their tempers had been badly frayed.

He was slow in memorizing his part. A fortnight before the opening, he was still rehearsing with the "book" in hand. Ross found an effective way to persuade him to hurry. His action was characteristic of his whole manner in dealing with Charley — a manner remarkable for its patience and tortuousness.

"By the way, Charley," he said after rehearsal one day, "your friend Hunter's very hurt with you."

Charley glanced at me inquiringly, but I was as nonplussed as he. I said nothing.

"Yes," Ross continued to lie urbanely, "he thinks you have a deep-rooted aversion to learning his lines. He's got it into his head you dislike the part."

"Is that true, Paul?" Charley asked accusingly.

"Oh, I've told him he's just one of these overnervous, hypersensitive dramatists," Ross said, giving me no chance to speak. "Of course, I know perfectly well he has nothing to worry about — especially since he's delighted with the way you're *reading* the part. But, after all, Hunter's new to the theater and this is his first play. I suppose we shouldn't blame him for being a bit anxious."

Ross looked benign. I felt uncomfortable. Charley stood tracing patterns on the floor with his walking stick.

At last he drew himself up and faced me. "Paul," he said, and I could tell from the expression in his eyes and from a certain forced

quality in his voice that he was seriously upset. "I have the greatest admiration for your play, and I've never had a part I liked better. I can only say I will do my best to put your mind at ease." He walked stiffly out of the theater.

Ross beamed. "Well, Hunter," he said, forestalling any protest from me, "something had to be done. And I think I hit on the best psychological approach."

Next morning, Charley arrived only ten minutes late, and was able to stumble through the first two acts of the play without looking at the "book."

About a week before the opening, Ross ordered a complete "run-through" — a dressless dress rehearsal. The whole performance proved highly encouraging and nearly polished enough to be given in public. Charley got through without a single prompt and without missing an entrance. At the end Ross congratulated the cast and told them they'd "better all go home and get a good night's rest." As the others started to leave, Charley stepped forward. "Is our author in front?" he called.

"Yes," I called back, after clearing my throat.

"I want a word or two with you, Paul. Don't run away." We met in the passageway by the pass door.

"Well, Paul," he said, holding out his hand. "Are we on speaking terms again?"

"Haven't we been?" I supposed he was joking.

He gazed at me inscrutably and continued to hold out his hand, which eventually I was obliged to take, though I felt extremely foolish as I did so.

"After the *démarche* you made," he said, "with Angus."

"Oh that!" I interrupted. "Well, you see —"

Charley cut me short.

"My dear fellow, you gave me what I deserved." He released my hand. "But it wasn't just laziness with me, Paul. I've been having a rather difficult time of it lately."

"I'm sorry, Charley," I murmured sympathetically.

"Oh, never mind about that now," he said, clapping me on the back. "Your play's the important thing. We've got to give you a success."

He put his hands on my shoulders, and looked at me searchingly. "Is there anything in my performance you're not satisfied with, Paul? If there is, I wish you'd tell me. I don't want to let you down in any way, you know."

"No, Charley, I can honestly say you're giving as fine a performance as I'd ever hoped for in the part."

"Thank you," he said quietly.

A good producer, I reflected, must be a good psychologist, and I took off my hat to Ross, who had demonstrated that he knew how to play on Charley's sentimentality.

CHAPTER IX

AFTER the final dress rehearsal I went round to congratulate Charley. He seemed anxious for a talk. He dismissed his dresser, and urged me to sit down.

I was exhausted, and lolled back on the couch using the wall as a pillow. Charley was seated at the dressing table with his back to me. He was removing his make-up.

"So you really think it went well?" He said, half-turning round, and holding the towel suspended.

"On the whole, yes. There were a lot of technical hitches, I'm afraid. But Angus says they're a good sign."

"Ah, of course. He's thinking of the theatrical superstition. You know it, don't you? A good dress rehearsal is a bad omen. By the way," he said, the words coming jerkily as he rubbed his face, removing the make-up. "I hope you've been bidden to the party."

"Yes, thank you very much."

There was to be a buffet supper at his house after the first night, and I had received a printed card announcing that Mrs. Charles Stranleigh would be "At Home" for the occasion.

"It was to have been just for you and Angus and the cast," he resumed. "But now it's going to be rather a bigger affair, I gather. Lise Stael has a concert the same night, so Renee has decided to turn it into a double celebration. I hope you won't mind. Do you know Lise by any chance? A very brilliant creature. She's Renee's bosom pal."

"Is she?" I said noncommittally. There seemed no point in mentioning that I had met her at his house.

"Renee wants me to get home as soon as possible to welcome the guests. I'm the host, after all. I've been wondering," he added, as he peered into the mirror to make sure that his face was cleansed of grease paint, "if you'd be kind enough to escort Kitty, Paul." He rose, removed the dressing gown that he was wearing over his vest and went over to the washstand.

"Oh . . ." I said. I was taken completely off guard.

He glanced towards me, a slightly deprecating smile on his lips. "You don't sound enormously enthusiastic."

"Well, after all —" I began, and stopped short. I was on the point of telling him that I saw no reason why I should insult his wife by escorting Kitty to her party. But then I decided that I should be making needless mischief if I did this. In the first place, so far as I was aware, he knew nothing of that tempestuous interview I had had with Renee. In the second place, I doubted whether Kitty *was* his mistress. And in the third place, whether she was or no, I presumed Renee had been persuaded to send the girl an invitation and must, therefore, have got over her suspicions.

"I wish you would, Paul," he said earnestly. "I realize you don't care much for Kitty personally, and I won't pretend you'll find her the most stimulating companion in the world. But, after all, she is your leading lady. And you're pleased with her work, aren't you? I think she deserves to have a little fuss made over her, don't you?"

The idea of facing Renee with Kitty Lane on my arm was still far from appealing. But when he put his request in this way, I didn't see how I could refuse it without appearing intolerably churlish.

"All right, Charley. If you think I should."

"That's very good of you," he said warmly. "I'm sure she'll be awfully bucked. And frankly it's a great relief to me. I feel rather responsible for her, you know." He turned away from me, and began putting on his day clothes. "You don't have to see her home, Paul," he added, as though he thought it necessary to lighten my burden as much as possible. "If she doesn't get off with any of the eligible young bachelors, we'll just put her in a cab."

"Oh, I'll discharge my duty in full," I said bravely.

"No, Paul, there's really no need. She lives in the wilderness. Besides, I hope you'll stay until the party's over. Then we'll have a chance to talk about the first night — conduct a real post-mortem. We can get the morning papers and read the notices as soon as they come out. Does that appeal to you?"

"Indeed, it does."

"Good. I've always wanted to be present at the moment you discover yourself a famous dramatist."

"Please, Charley," I exclaimed. "This is counting chickens with a vengeance!"

"Nonsense, my dear fellow!"

He glanced round and then came up to me. "Paul," he said, as though he would be most hurt if I were to answer affirmatively, "you're not seriously worried about the outcome, are you?"

"Well, Charley," I said, "I'm naturally a pessimistic fellow, you know. But I can tell you, touching wood, that I've seldom felt as optimistic as I do at this moment."

I meant it. His buoyant certainty that the play would succeed, even though I realized it was probably based on nothing more substantial than a wish to see a friend prosper, was none the less infectious.

But he came near to robbing me of it at the crucial moment, for when I went round to wish him well before the performance, he was as woeful as last night he had been elated. I found him, already in costume and make-up for his part, lying full length on the couch, dismally studying the ceiling.

"Paul," he said, detaining me with a gesture, "she won't be in front. I've done my utmost to persuade her, but it's useless."

"Who are you talking about?"

"Renee, of course."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I imagine . . ."

"She's never missed a first night of mine before. She says she can't

get away because of all the preparations for the party. But that's only an excuse."

He was upset, I supposed, by Renee's absence because it conflicted with that sense of fitness which had always been a dominant characteristic of his. Even so, he should have been prepared for it, I thought. He had told me that Renee was becoming increasingly reluctant to leave the house, and I had understood him to mean that this was symptomatic of her neurotic condition. But I was in no mood to pursue the subject at the moment.

"Anyway, Charley," I said, backing out of the door, "the best of luck."

"Thank you, Paul," he answered mournfully.

As I hurried off to the front of the house, I had dread visions of him casting a pall over the whole production. But I need not have worried. He did superlatively well. And, to judge from the rapturous reception at the end, his prophecy of success for the play was fulfilled.

Both Angus Ross and I were called onto the stage, and both of us made speeches. Charley also made a speech: his set speech except that he included in it a special tribute to me. "If you will forgive a personal confidence, ladies and gentlemen," he said, "the author is one of my oldest friends and also [*this with a smile*] the discerning critic who first encouraged me to make the stage my profession. I may be prejudiced, therefore, in believing him unusually gifted. But for many years it has been my hope that one day he would write a play and that I would have the privilege of appearing in it. [*A pause.*] That day has come." [*Cheers.*]

The curtain rose and fell fifteen times before the applause dwindled into a few scattered clappings, and so died. "Fifteen curtains, by Jove!" one of the elder players whispered excitedly. "And none of them stolen. We're all right!" "Could have got twenty easily," another whispered back, with a disgusted glance at the prompt corner.

The orchestra striking up *God Save the King* was faintly audible behind the lowered curtain. At once Charley stood rigidly at atten-

tion, and the rest of the cast, though evidently unused to such a fervent show of patriotism, eventually decided to follow his example.

Afterwards he smiled at me, put his thumbs up, and without a word to anyone, walked quickly off the stage, intent, as I realized, on obeying his wife's instructions to hurry home.

Ross asked whether he could give me a lift to the party, and seemed surprised when I told him of my obligation to Kitty.

"Has Renee invited her?" he said.

"Oh, of course," I said. "At least I presume so."

"Really?" He still sounded doubtful. "Well, you'd better find yourself a chair in my office. She'll be half the night getting changed."

Kitty did keep me waiting more than an hour and a half. When at last we arrived the party was in full swing, with close to a hundred people present. It sprawled from the dining room on the ground floor, where cold food and champagne were being served, to the drawing room on the first floor. The dining room was crowded, and there was a constant two-way stream up and down the staircase of men in white ties and women in extravagant evening gowns.

It was mere chance that we should run straight into our hostess. She happened to be standing at the foot of the staircase, sipping a glass of champagne while she chatted to Angus Ross and several others. Her greeting to me was unexpectedly cordial, but when I introduced Kitty to her, she froze. At once I realized that she had not invited Kitty to her party.

"Who?" she said, pretending not to have caught the name and inclining her head as if in an effort to hear better the next time. True, the din issuing from the dining room was fairly deafening.

I repeated the name, but she still withheld recognition.

"Helen," Kitty put in foolishly, with a sort of proud and condescending giggle.

"I thought you said Kitty," Renee remarked coldly to me.

"I meant Helen in the play," Kitty persisted.

"Oh yes, of course," Renee said, turning her back on us. "How stupid of me to forget." She glided away.

Ross came to my rescue. He smiled at Kitty encouragingly and said that there were several young men "faint with anxiety" to meet her. He winked at me, as he led her away.

I found myself by the dining-room entrance, lurking uncomfortably at the fringe of a throng of people who seemed to belong to a fashionable fraternity of party-goers and were all gaily absorbed in eating and drinking and conversing, brutally unaware that the author of the night's play was longing to be congratulated. I saw Charley in the distance, surrounded by admirers, mostly women. From time to time he smiled and bowed his head a little in this direction or that, but his attitude gave me the impression of such aloofness and inflexibility that I was reminded of nothing so much as a tall and handsome monument around which birds swirl ineffectually.

A woman's voice, a vaguely familiar, guttural-sounding voice, said: "Ah, my fellow guest of honor. Everyone is asking where you are. How are you, Mr. Hunter?" It was Lise Stael. "Look," she said, her voice sinking to an urgent whisper, "I must talk to you. Come."

She turned abruptly, and, with a proprietary air, opened the door to a small front room off the hall, which evidently was Renee's writing room. Lise seemed completely at home in the house.

"We shan't be disturbed here," she said.

I felt ill at ease. She was Renee's great friend, and I thought I knew what was coming.

She stood in the center of the room, facing me. "Why did you bring that girl here?" she said in a manner so terse and insulting that I was shocked.

"I'm not sure that it concerns you," I said slowly, trying to control my temper. "But if you must know, our host invited Miss Lane and he asked me to escort her."

"Oh," she closed her lips tightly. "It wasn't your idea, then? I thought you might have brought Miss Lane to the house to spite Renee. Was I wrong?"

"Really, Miss Stael," I said hotly, "I don't propose to answer absurd accusations like that." I stepped back to the door.

"One moment!" she commanded. "Was it really Charley who invited the girl? And he asked *you* to bring her? Well, that's *most* surprising." She shrugged her shoulders, and sauntered to the window. "I'd never have credited him with sufficient subtlety of mind."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I think you know," she said quietly, as she parted the curtains at the window and looked out.

"I'm afraid I haven't any idea at all."

"Oh, come now," she said. "Mightn't he have assumed you'd be the very last person who'd want to further this intrigue of his?"

I was completely baffled as well as annoyed. "Miss Stael," I said, moving a few steps towards her, "would you mind telling me what on earth you're talking about?"

She turned to face me again. The movement was languid, but then she appeared surprised by my expression which, though I thought of it as ferocious, must have been predominantly bewildered. She opened her mouth to speak, but checked whatever words were in her mind to say. "Perhaps I'm mistaken," she murmured at last, almost apologetically.

"Mistaken about what?" I snapped.

She stood looking at me in a curiously appraising way, as though I were a masquerader who had thrown off his disguise. My mind went back to that afternoon when I had first met her. She and Renee had acted as if they had some private joke about me. Suddenly, I suspected something which I found horrifying and incredible. Yet it was the only explanation that would fit the facts. Renee had baited me that afternoon for Lise's amusement. Now Lise's insinuating remarks pointed to only one conclusion: that she had been led to believe there was something perverted in my friendship for Charley.

"Mistaken about what?" I repeated, raising my voice.

"Oh, nothing," she said soothingly. "This household is full of delusions, you know. I suppose if one spends too much time in it one's apt to become a victim of fancies oneself. One's apt to jump to

quite wrong conclusions." She smiled, and held out her hand. "I apologize for my rudeness. If I've upset you, please forgive me."

I didn't move. "I must ask you for an explanation," I said.

She continued to smile ingratiatingly. "We must meet very soon and have a long talk. I'm sure we'll find a great deal to tell one another. Mutual friends of the Stranleighs always do. Probably you've been told things about me which are not true. The thought only amuses me. I don't let it worry me in the least."

"I haven't been told anything about you that's derogatory. If slanderous things have been said behind my back, I want to know what they are." My tone of voice was imperative, but I felt my determination weakening against her refusal to be intimidated and even more so against her suggestion that I was as worldly-wise as she.

"Oh, you shall," she said, "but not now." Her voice assumed a tone of confidential earnestness. "I'm not blaming *you*. But it was foolish to bring that girl to the house. Renee's in a dreadful state about it."

"She has no need to be." I was disposed to defend Charley even though he had victimized me. All he had done, after all, was to use me to prevent Kitty's exclusion from the party. I felt certain Kitty honestly didn't realize she was an unwanted guest, and I believed Charley had been guided mostly by sheer kindness of heart.

Lise made an impatient gesture. "What's happened tonight is more than Renee can bear. Charley should have realized that. There was no need to ask the girl here, whether he's innocent or guilty."

"He asked her because he's innocent. I don't blame him. He didn't feel he should insult her."

"So he's insulted his wife instead."

"Only in her imagination."

"Maybe. But unfortunately Renee has a particularly vivid imagination, as Charley should know by this time. Anyway, unless we do something about it, there'll be a nasty scene before the evening's over."

I looked at her sharply. She was serious and persuasive, yet per-

fectly calm. I felt sure that she wasn't a woman given to needless alarm.

"Where's Renee now?"

"She was in her room when I left her to look for you. She swore she wouldn't come down again until the girl was out of the house. She may stick to that, but —" She broke off the sentence. "I can't promise what she'll do. Sometimes she's quite uncontrollable."

"What do you suggest?" I was pacing up and down the room.

"You must take this Kitty home at once."

"But what explanation can I give her?"

"Oh, surely you can think of something." She seemed amused at my agitation. "You're tired, you have a sick mother — anything. Try to slip away, quietly, and don't let Charley see you go."

"I promised him I'd stay to the end, as a matter of fact."

"Well, you can come back again yourself — if you want to."

"All right," I said. "I'll do my best." I opened the door to let her pass. "I'm glad you warned me."

She smiled serenely. "Oh, I've grown accustomed to dealing with emergencies in the Swiss Family Stranleigh." Then with a glance over her shoulder, she added, "They're recurrent, you know."

It took me some time to squirm my way upstairs and to the far end of the drawing room where I had spotted Kitty. She wasn't at all receptive to the idea of leaving so soon. My efforts were impeded by a stage-struck youth eager to replace me as her escort. When things seemed to have reached an impasse, Ross appeared, and, with his backing, I eventually managed to get her out of the house and into a taxi.

She lived with her widowed mother in a remote part of North London. The drive was a long one, and by the time I got back the house was in partial darkness. I rang the bell tentatively and was on the point of giving up when Charley himself came to the door.

"My dear Paul," he exclaimed, "where on earth have you been? The festivities are over. Lise's still here — with Renee somewhere.

Otherwise there's not a soul left. It was an extraordinarily dull party. I was bored stiff myself."

"I haven't just arrived, you know." I explained that I had taken Kitty home, and had now returned in fulfillment of our arrangement to go and buy the early morning papers.

"You *did* bring her then?"

"Oh, yes. I promised you I would," I said meaningfully, though I didn't intend to accuse him openly of his deception.

"Well, I'm ashamed I wasn't on hand to welcome her. Did she get on all right?"

"I think so."

"Good. I'm most grateful to you, my dear fellow, for looking after her."

We were still standing by the front door. He started to help me off with my things, then stopped dead, his face assuming a troubled, self-absorbed expression.

"Tell me Paul," he said at last, "did Renee talk to Kitty at all?"

"Oh, she said how-do-you-do when we arrived. I don't think Kitty saw her after that. I didn't."

"Was she agreeable?"

"Perfectly," I lied, repaying him in his own coin.

He lapsed into another silence. "Would you care for a drink before we go?" he asked abruptly.

"I don't think so — thanks."

I guessed that this was the answer he wanted, and I was right. "In that case," he said cheerfully, "there's no reason why we shouldn't leave at once."

His movements were usually deliberate, but now he acted with remarkable agility. He rushed to the hall cupboard and pulled out his coat and hat. "Come on, old fellow!" he said, hurrying ahead of me to open the front door.

But he was too late. "Charley!" I heard Renee's voice command shrilly.

We both turned round.

She had just come downstairs with Lise, who was wearing her cloak. Renee advanced unsteadily towards us, leaving Lise behind at the other end of the hall near the staircase. Her eyes were fixed on Charley, and she gave no sign that she had even seen me. He stepped forward, and they confronted each other. As the four of us were placed now, it was as if we were met for a duel, with Lise and myself as seconds.

"Where have you been?" Renee said. Her voice was unnaturally loud.

"Down here, my dear," he explained mildly, "speeding the parting guests."

"Oh really? Is that what you've been doing for the past two hours?"

A faintly mocking smile crossed his lips. "Let me think now. Must I account for every movement?"

Her mouth quivered and she clenched her hands, which she held by her sides, more tightly. She was pale with anger.

"I suppose you realize," she resumed, making no effort to lower her voice, "that you've been unpardonably rude to Lise. She consented to give a private recital for your guests, and you didn't even come up to the drawing room. Everyone noticed your behavior. They must have thought you an unspeakable oaf!"

"I'm sorry, Lise darling," he spoke to her over Renee's shoulder. "If I'd realized —"

"Oh, that's quite all right, Charley," Lise said, coming forward. "It was just on the spur of the moment. Renee, my dear," she added placatingly, touching her on the shoulder, "I'm sure Charley didn't wish to slight me. It's all forgotten. Let us say good night now."

She held out her hand, but Renee remained facing Charley. With a shrug of resignation, and a glance in my direction, Lise stepped back. The way out of the front door was blocked, of course. I stood quite still, wishing I were deaf, blind and invisible.

"Where are you going now?" Renee shot the question at Charley. Before he could reply, she raised her voice to a shriek. "To spend

the night with your mistress, I suppose? Which one? Tell me which one?"

"Paul and I," he said loudly enough to silence her, "are going out to buy the papers. We wish to see the notices of the play."

"Do you really expect me to believe that?"

"Ask Paul."

She gave me a swift, contemptuous glance. "Oh, I'm sure Paul would say anything you wanted him to. Your devoted slave. Your bottle-washer. He does all your dirty work, doesn't he? He even brings common prostitutes to the house for you. He helps you to insult and humiliate me!" She turned, wild-eyed, to Lise. "You see, I told you! He's going to spend the night with that creature." She started to laugh hysterically.

"Renee, please!" Lise gripped her arm. "You'll have all the servants down here in a minute!"

"Swell! I hope I do! I don't care!" She rounded on Charley again. "I should hurry, if I were you."

Charley had gone white, but he seemed remarkably self-possessed. "I think, Paul," he said, without turning his head, "you had better wait for me outside."

"Why?" Renee screeched.

But again she gave him no chance to answer. Suddenly, she slapped him hard across the face with her open palm. A blotch of red showed up against the pallor of his cheeks.

He didn't move. He just stood looking at her with an expression in which sorrow and contempt were mingled. She backed away.

"Well, why don't you hit *me*?" she burst out. "You wouldn't hesitate if we were alone. Are you afraid in front of witnesses?"

He said nothing, and all at once she seemed exhausted. Lise stalked up to her and took her arm. "Please, my dear," she said gently. "This is all so foolish and unnecessary. You've had a tiring evening. Why don't you go to bed now? I'll stay with you for a while if you like."

Lise guided her towards the staircase, and glanced reassuringly at Charley. He nodded his thanks. "Come, Paul," he said softly, as

though we were about to leave the sickroom of an invalid who had fallen asleep.

But at the sound of his voice all Renee's fury was revived. She rushed at him, before Lise could restrain her, and started tearing at his face with her fingernails.

Charley grabbed her by the wrists, forcing her hands down to her sides. She had already scratched him badly enough to draw blood.

"Now go to your tart if you want to!" she screamed as she struggled to free herself. "Go to her and be damned to you."

She continued to struggle, kicking at his shins. He tightened his grip on her wrists, and she winced with pain. She started to breathe heavily.

"She won't find you a pretty sight," she managed to gasp frantically. "You're bleeding like a pig! Your face is covered with blood!"

At last she had driven him beyond the bounds of patience. His eyes filled with uncontrollable rage. His jaw shook. He lifted her hands and brought them together, and, using them as a lever, flung her from him. She staggered, but did not fall. Then he shouted with all the incomparable volume of his voice, "Get out of my way, you bitch! Leave me alone!"

The words in themselves were not much, but their sound was like thunder and on Renee they seemed to have a terrifying effect. Her body sagged, and she stood with her head sunk forward and her arms hanging limply. Charley walked by her to the other end of the hall. There he paused, looked round as if to apologize to me for the fact that our expedition was now impossible. With his hand on the banister, he slowly mounted the stairs and disappeared from sight.

For a second or two after he was gone, no one spoke or moved. Then Renee lifted her head and started to cry noiselessly. Her mouth was twisted and tears — alcoholic tears, I supposed — were trickling down her cheeks. Lise put an arm round her and led her to the chest that stood against the wall.

Suddenly Renee burst into violent sobbing. She cast herself face downward so that she lay with the lower half of her body dangling

over the chest. Lise looked at her contemplatively, then turned to me. "Mr. Hunter, would you tell my chauffeur, please, that I shan't be ready for a while? I shall be happy to drive you home if you would care to wait in the car."

"Thank you." Seldom had I said those words with greater sincerity.

I went out into the freshness of the night.

Nearly an hour must have passed before Lise rejoined me. She looked tired, but still remarkably unharassed. The chauffeur spread the rug over our knees, and then banged the door to.

"Was he getting impatient?" she whispered.

"Oh, he seemed quite stoical."

"I don't want to offend him. He's only loaned to me, you know. It's disgraceful to have kept him up so late, isn't it?"

I glanced at my watch. It was four o'clock.

"You must be exhausted," I said, as the car moved off.

"I am," she sighed. "The penalty of friendship."

There was a pause before she resumed in a curiously matter-of-fact voice, "A marriage made in hell. Those two are destroying each other."

"Yes." I could think of nothing to add to her coldly succinct diagnosis.

"Where do you wish to be driven?"

"Perhaps you'd be kind enough to drop me off at Hyde Park Corner. I might be able to buy the papers there."

"Dear me!" she laughed, as she leaned forward to tap on the glass partition and give the chauffeur his instructions. "Was that really all poor Charley wanted to do tonight?"

"As far as I know, yes. Can't you disabuse Renee of this idea she's got about Charley and the unfortunate Kitty Lane?"

"Oh, Renee suffers from a host of delusions, but —"

"Including a delusion about me," I interrupted sharply. I was reminded of our earlier conversation: I wanted to know whether

Renee had told her my friendship for Charley was in some way abnormal. "We may as well be frank. She told you something, didn't she, that led you to believe —"

"Oh, please," she said, pressing my hand consolingly. "When we have that long talk we've promised ourselves, I'll tell you anything you want to know. But I can't face any more complications or disturbances at the moment."

Against my inclinations, I allowed myself to be silenced.

"Your Kitty what's-her-name," she said — "I'm afraid, you know, if I had a husband who took to staying out all night for no good reason he could explain . . ."

"But is that true?"

For reply she chuckled softly.

"You think I'm being naïve?"

"That depends. You are if you imagine Charley couldn't be guilty as charged. On the other hand, if you think this particular girl's too virtuous . . ."

"Oh, I'm sure she's tremendously respectable."

"Well, that's another matter, of course." She chuckled again, rather maliciously. "Poor Renee! You know, if she suspected a duchess she wouldn't be nearly so upset."

It was dark in the back of the car, and we could hardly see each other as we talked. But she must have sensed that I was shocked.

"Oh, please don't think I'm being disloyal or unkind," she added hastily. "I'm fond of Renee and I'm even more sorry for her. But there's no fun in having women friends, especially such demanding ones, if one isn't allowed to discuss their faults. Don't you agree? Besides, I'm not telling you anything you don't know already. It's common knowledge that our Renee's a snob. And you must have guessed she doesn't really care for Charley at all."

This struck me as a diabolic apologia, but I wanted her to go on talking. Obviously there was much about the Stranleighs I could learn from her.

"If she doesn't care for Charley at all," I said, "how do you explain her behavior tonight?"

"Oh, that's too big a question to answer at this hour. Bacchus had something to do with it. Then, of course, she's possessive. Still, love isn't the only reason for possessiveness, is it? In her case — well, the plain truth is there's only one thing she likes about Charley: his position."

"For which she's largely responsible — to do her justice."

"Really?" she said offhandedly, turning to glance out of the window.

Her lack of interest astonished me, and I thought it odd that I should be defending Charley's wife against the harsh words of this woman who was supposedly her greatest friend.

"How long have you known Renee?" I asked pointedly.

"Oh, I've known her well for only about — six months." She paused, then resumed in the amused, confidential manner of one who has a rather salacious anecdote to tell. "You know, when I told her the other day that I envied her having Charley for a husband, she said she found him such a bore that she'd be delighted if I'd take him off her hands!"

"Did the idea appeal to you?"

"Oh, well," she laughed, and there was a hint of impropriety in her tone. "He may not be overburdened with brains, but he is very beautiful, isn't he?"

"Seriously," I said, after a pause. "I think if someone would take him off her hands or if someone would take *her* off *his* hands, it would be about the best thing that could happen to both of them. As a matter of fact, why on earth don't they agree to separate?"

"In her case, I think that's fairly obvious."

"What about him?"

"You mean why doesn't he leave her?" She seemed amused. "Surely you ought to be able to answer that better than I can."

"I suppose I ought. But, you know, I really doubt whether I understand Charley any better now than I did the first day I met him.

And that, come to think of it, is getting on for six years ago."

There was a brief silence. She appeared to be reflecting. I looked out of the window, and saw that we would soon be at Hyde Park Corner. I regretted this, for I wanted to prolong the conversation.

"Charley's an artist, of course," she said at last, as though announcing a well-considered opinion, "with more than his share of the artist's volatility, but at the same time he's very much the stolid, conventional Englishman at heart — with his roast beef and all the rest of it."

"Oh, yes," I agreed. "Have you ever seen him standing to attention when the National Anthem's played?"

"I can imagine it." She laughed shortly, giving me the impression that I had not chosen a particularly happy example of what she meant. Then she said, "The thought of leaving Renee would conflict with his bourgeois sense of duty. Probably the idea's never even entered his head."

"Suppose someone put it there?"

"Ah, well, I should say he's extremely pliable in some ways and extremely obstinate in others. It might be difficult to free him of his maxims including the one — how do you say it? — 'If you make your own bed you must lie in it.'"

"But not impossible, I hope?"

"Perhaps not impossible. In fact," she added with a complacently mysterious air, "I think there's one way it could certainly be done."

Just then the car drew up the curb. As we said good-by I arranged to telephone her within the next few days.

I bought all the morning papers — the *Times*, the *Morning Post*, the *Daily News*, the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Daily Chronicle*, the old green-paged *Westminster Gazette* and the rest. I hurried home with the bundle stacked under my arm. I began my feverish search for the dramatic reviews as soon as I had the light on in the hall of my furnished lodginghouse, without bothering to take off my things. And if at the end of it I didn't learn that I was already a famous

dramatist, I did find that on balance I was rated a promising one. But the notices were overwhelmingly Charley's. Several referred to the failure of his last play and were happy to report that this had been for him only a brief deviation from the road of triumph. One critic, harking back to Byron's description of Edmund Kean, hailed him as the "Sun's Bright Child." An unconsciously ironic comment, I thought, remembering the tragedy of Kean's private life.

CHAPTER X

THE SECOND NIGHT was sold out. A smiling and perspiring box-office keeper told me I would have to stand. What greater privilege could the author ask?

I took my place at the back of the dress circle just as the performance was due to start. For a quarter of an hour I waited for the curtain, and by that time my legs were aching from mental anxiety as well as physical strain. The audience was impatient, from time to time breaking into spasmodic bursts of applause, each one louder and more sustained than the one before. Just when I was on the point of making a quick trip behind to find out what the trouble was, the house lights were extinguished.

The curtain rose then, but not on the first scene of the play. It rose instead on a pair of dusty-looking black "tabs." One part was pulled back a little at the center by an unseen hand, and then Arnold Fraser, the business manager, stepped through, blinking nervously at the footlights.

He held up his hands to silence the surprised murmurings from all parts of the house. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said in a thin voice that matched the pallid look of his face. "I must ask your kind indulgence. Mr. Charles Stranleigh has been suddenly indisposed, and, therefore, is unable to appear tonight. I am glad to say that Mr. Stranleigh's indisposition is not . . ."

I didn't wait to hear any more. I made a dash for Charley's dressing room, imagining I would find him lying on the couch, with a doctor in attendance. The room was empty. His costumes were hanging neatly in the cupboard, and his make-up things were undisturbed. I found his dresser lurking in the passage outside.

"Where is he?" I asked excitedly.

"Can't say, sir. I haven't seen him."

I met Fraser as he came off the stage and he said as he hurried past me, "The understudy's going on. See you in the front office. Keep clear of the stage. They've got their work cut out."

Ten minutes later he appeared, sat down opposite me and wiped his forehead.

"Phew!"

"What's the matter with Charley?" I asked.

"Damned unfortunate." He paused. "Only twelve asked for their money back — all stalls folk. But if Stranleigh's away much longer, it's going to kill the advance stone dead."

I was getting impatient. "Where's Ross?"

"At the Stranleighs' house."

"Then I'll go along there myself. I might catch him before he leaves. In any case I'd like to see Charley."

I half rose, but he waved me back. "Look," he said, shifting uneasily, "I'd rather the governor broke the news to you, but . . ."

"What is it, for Heaven's sake?" I was thoroughly alarmed. "Is Charley seriously ill?"

"Oh, no, but . . ." He leaned forward, and pointed his pince-nez at me. "This mustn't go any further, because the story's got to be kept out of the press. Stranleigh isn't ill. He's simply done one of his vanishing acts. When he hadn't turned up by the half-hour, we telephoned his wife. All she knew was that he'd left the house early this morning. She hasn't seen him since."

"Good God!" I cried. "Oughtn't we to call the police?" I remembered last night's scene with Renee and fantastic and terrifying possibilities raced through my mind.

Fraser merely smiled. "That's the last thing we want to do. I warned the governor that Stranleigh'd let us in for trouble of this sort."

Momentarily I was too astonished to understand. Then I did remember that during my first interview with him and Ross, Fraser

had mentioned "difficulties" with Charley. I'd been mystified at the time, but I hadn't thought about it since. "Is that what you meant when we first discussed him?"

He nodded. "I've never heard of him missing an actual performance before, but he's walked out of rehearsals several times."

"And vanished?" I said incredulously. "Where on earth does he go? What does he do?"

He smiled at my innocence. "I could guess."

"Is Kitty off, too?"

"No. But she's not the only pebble on the beach, is she?" He went to the door. "Will you wait here for a bit? I expect the governor will want a word with you."

A few minutes later he was back. "Here," he said, arousing me from a despondent daze. "This came for you this afternoon. I forgot it."

I opened the telegram languidly, expecting a belated first-night message of good wishes. The moment I had read it, I jumped to my feet.

"I know where Charley is," I shouted at Fraser.

"You do? Is that from him, then?"

"No — from an old friend of his. This time you guessed wrong."

He couldn't make any sense out of the telegram. No wonder, for I didn't altogether understand it myself. It was from Bill Sanderson, who said Charley had turned up at his house unexpectedly, and couldn't be persuaded to leave. Would I come at once, and telephone him at the Northern Dyestuffs Company when I arrived. On the strength of this message, I promised to have Charley back in time for tomorrow's night performance. Fraser sent an announcement to the newspapers saying that Charley had suffered a sudden loss of voice brought on by a throat ailment, but hoped to resume his part without further interruption.

I caught the midnight train for Manchester.

Bill Sanderson was at the station to meet me. He was standing by the ticket barrier, a lonely figure, peering hopefully at all the passengers as they passed. I noticed he had put on weight, and his face had grown more rubicund than ever. Now it wore a worried expression which was comical as well as pathetically incongruous. When I stopped in front of him, a look of relief spread slowly over his face.

"Mr. Hunter!" he exclaimed. "I thought to myself happen he'll be on this train."

"I got your telegram only last night. Is Charley still with you?"

"Aye, and he won't budge."

"Better let me talk to him. We'll get a taxi."

"No," he said quickly. "No, that won't do. First I must explain."

"Suppose we have some breakfast then?" I looked at my watch. "It's quarter to eight. When must you be at work?"

"Nine sharp."

"Then you have a half an hour or so. That should give us enough time. We must decide what to do."

"Aye," he said mournfully. "If we can decide."

His relief at seeing me had vanished. He appeared crushed by the weight of the problem which had come upon him.

As we entered the dingy station restaurant he looked round furtively as if he were afraid of something. I ordered a full breakfast, but he wanted only a cup of tea.

"I gathered from your telegram," I said, "that Charley turned up at your house, and that you're having difficulty with him and need my help. Go on from there."

"Aye," he said, looking round as if to reassure himself that he was safe from prying eyes and ears. "Aye. Well, you see, it's like this. . . ."

He paused, obviously uncertain how to begin. Then he burst out, "I'm not blaming Charley, understand. I'm not blaming *her*, either."

"What do you mean?"

I spoke with as much impatience as surprise. That question was

one I had to repeat many times before I found out what had happened. Bill wanted desperately to confide in me, because that was his only hope of extricating himself from an impossible situation. But his story hurt his pride and conflicted with his loyalties so painfully that he often sought refuge behind ambiguities and evasions. By dint of persistent cross-examination and by inferring as much from what he didn't say as from what he did, I eventually got a fair idea of the truth.

Bill's wife, Eileen, was in love with Charley. Until yesterday, she had met him only once, when she and Bill had entertained him at their home after the Norman Grant memorial service. I already knew from Jasper Blake that Charley had gone out of his way on that occasion to flatter her, and now I learned that she had taken him seriously. Ever since she had been obsessed with the thought of him.

Bill felt certain that Charley was still unaware of this. Still, from Eileen's point of view, he thought it "quite understandable." For Bill, Charley was an old friend who hadn't been in the least changed by success, but for Eileen, he was a famous actor. It was natural that she should have been dazzled by him.

This apologia conjured up a picture of Eileen as a simple, inexperienced, easily impressionable girl — a sort of female counterpart of Bill himself. That was identical with the picture I had had from Jasper Blake. But, as Bill unfolded his story, I realized that it was extremely superficial. Eileen, I decided, must be a passionate woman, strong-willed and selfish.

Undoubtedly Bill loved her deeply, but he knew that she did not love him nearly so well in return, and for this reason, perhaps, was afraid of her. Though her infatuation with Charley made him unhappy, he hadn't the courage to oppose it. She kept urging him to invite Charley to the house again, and finally she became so insistent that he did write to Charley, asking him to visit them when next he was in Manchester. Charley replied that he foresaw no immediate chance of getting away from London, but that he would

certainly like to see his old friend again. Bill showed the letter to Eileen. She seemed content.

That had been six months ago. Bill had received no further word from Charley, and Eileen had begun to talk about him less. Then, yesterday morning, Charley had turned up.

Bill was at work when he arrived — sometime between ten and eleven o'clock. Eileen opened the door to find Charley on the doorstep, suitcase in hand. He asked politely — almost humbly — whether he might come in. After she had blurted out a welcome, he said that he would like to wash and tidy up. Plainly he needed to do so. His hair was disheveled, his clothes crumpled, his face dirty and unshaven, with scratches on it.

Eileen told Bill later (and this revealed a cruel streak in her) that she felt dizzy with excitement, and nearly fainted. She assumed that Charley had come to spend the night and jumped to the conclusion that Bill had invited him without warning her. That, she thought, was typical of her clumsy husband. Even if he had intended it as a pleasant surprise for her, he should not have allowed her to be caught like this, in the middle of her housework, by the one and only Charles Stranleigh.

After she had shown Charley to the spare room — a very small spare room which she was ashamed of — and had brought him hot water for his toilet, she went down to the sitting room to wait for him. After a long while, he reappeared. She was horrified to note how pale and tired he looked, and at once she was all concern for him. She realized that he was sick and needed her help. Her concern, maternal and possessive, banished her shyness of him.

He admitted he felt "a bit shaky." He had not slept and he wanted some brandy. She had none in the house so she told him to sit quietly while she went out to buy a bottle. He insisted on giving her the money for this, and thanked her "most sweetly" for her kindness. "He was just like a helpless child," she told Bill later.

When she got back, he was sitting where she had left him, staring into space. She poured him a stiff dose of the brandy, which he

gulped down. Then she persuaded him to take off his coat and shoes and stretch out on the sofa. He was trembling now, as though he were cold, so she fetched an eiderdown from upstairs and put it over him. He asked for more brandy. He apologized for making a nuisance of himself. She told him not to fret, that she would look after him. He said that that was what he wanted and on no account to let anyone else come near him. She took a chair, and sat down by him at the head of the sofa, hoping to find out what was wrong. Soon she realized that he was in no condition to talk. What he needed was rest. He reached up and took her hand, smiling his gratitude for her understanding.

When Bill came home for his midday dinner, he found them thus. Charley made an effort to get up, but Eileen ordered him not to move, and he flopped back, turning his face to the back rest of the sofa.

Before Bill could start asking questions, his wife hurried him into the kitchen. While she served him his meal, she told him in an urgent whisper what had happened. Bill then reminded her that Charley had opened in my play last night, and that, therefore, it was impossible for him to stay. He said that he must speak to Charley at once and find out what on earth was the trouble.

She protested vehemently. She had promised Charley that she would look after him. He was her patient. Without her permission no one might speak to him.

In vain Bill pointed out that it would be unfair to Charley not to make some attempt to persuade him to leave. Eileen said his professional engagements were not their concern, that the poor man was ill and it would be cruel to disturb him now. Bill suggested calling a doctor but she opposed this idea, too. Obviously, she was determined to keep Charley to herself for as long as she could.

Bill saw that no arguments of his would influence her. He dared not risk her anger by taking matters into his own hands. So he said no more.

As soon as Bill was served, Eileen went back to resume her vigil

over Charley. Bill finished his meal, and waited miserably in the kitchen until it was time for him to return to the office. When he passed through the sitting room on his way out, he saw that Charley was still lying motionless on the sofa. Eileen put a finger to her lips, as she came to open the front door for Bill and hand him his hat. He left without a word. She closed the door after him noiselessly.

Bill was wretched. He realized that he must do something to put matters right — not only for his own sake, but for Charley's as well. He hated to see him jeopardizing his whole career in this extraordinary and inexplicable fashion.

All afternoon Bill racked his brains for some way out of the sorry predicament. At last he hit on the idea of telegraphing me. This would at least give the theater fair warning of Charley's absence and would mean that he could look forward to help by tomorrow — if Charley stayed on.

He had phrased the telegram carefully, purposely refraining from giving me his home address for fear I might try to communicate with him there. He did not want Eileen ever to know that he had sent for me.

That evening when he got home shortly after six o'clock Charley had recovered from his earlier stupor and was striding about, gesticulating and talking to, or rather at, Eileen. Her cheeks were flushed, and she was following him, as he moved around, with shining eyes. She did not hear Bill come in, or at least she did not glance in his direction.

But Charley shouted out a welcome, and came and put an arm affectionately round Bill's shoulders. He was holding a tumbler of brandy and there was a half-empty bottle on the side table. His eyes looked dilated, and his speech was thick. Bill supposed that in her efforts to revive him, Eileen had made him a bit drunk.

Charley invited Bill to sit down and listen carefully. He had something of great urgency to tell him. Then, to Bill's amazement, Charley announced that he had given up the stage and London for good, that he had come back to Manchester to spend the rest of his

life in peace. He said Eileen was sympathetic. She had agreed that he might stay with them for the time being — as their lodger — provided Bill had no objections.

He went on to explain — at great length — that because he was unfortunate enough to possess a famous name and a famous face he must lie low for a while. He must not be seen out of doors. He thought so far he had “escaped” unobserved, and he was certain not a soul knew where he was now. Of course the entire press, a good part of the public, and all the theatrical managers in London, not to mention his wife, were probably banded together, trying to hunt him down. They wouldn’t give up the search in a hurry. Still, if he could remain hidden long enough, they would certainly tire of it in the end. Then he would be “free” again. He might even apply for a job at the Northern Dyestuffs Company and work with old Bill once more. He hadn’t got to decide about that yet. He had enough money saved up to last him until the chase was called off. He knew the Sandersons would help him. That was why he had come to them.

As Bill listened, his stupefaction gave place to acute vicarious shame. He was used to Charley’s eccentricities. In the old days he had helped him out of numerous minor scrapes, but he had never known Charley in such a state as this before nor dreamed him capable of such self-debasement.

He had at first supposed the half-empty bottle of brandy was the remains of the bottle Eileen had bought that morning. Now he suspected that Eileen must have gone out and purchased another bottle. At any rate, it was plain to him that Charley was more than “a bit drunk”; he had gone quite “daft.”

Bill tried to reason with him, but Charley seemed incapable of understanding and Eileen discouraged his efforts with furiously hostile looks. She seemed entranced by the appalling nonsense he was talking.

When she went to the kitchen to get tea, Bill followed her, hoping he could make her see “some sense.” But she was deaf to his

pleas. She said that she understood Charley, as Bill never could. He had come to them for help, and, as far as she was concerned, he had not come in vain. Her mind was made up. And she would thank Bill not to interfere. In fact, she would never forgive him if he did.

At this point, Bill was on the verge of losing his temper. He said Charley could have got as drunk as he was only with her assistance. Eileen promptly adopted the strategy of wounded silence, and soon he was begging for forgiveness. She forced him to purchase it. He had to promise to say nothing that might persuade Charley to change his mind about staying with them. Having won a total victory, she condescended to say that if Bill knew the terrible things she knew, why then he wouldn't blame Charley in the least and he'd realize why Charley had decided never to go back to London. When Bill asked her what these "terrible things" were, she said he must ask Charley.

He didn't get the chance to ask Charley. The rest of the evening was a nightmare. Eileen brought in tea, but she might as well have saved herself the trouble. She had not recovered her own appetite, and Bill's was now gone. Charley continued drinking brandy, talking more and more wildly. Eileen became nearly hysterical in her efforts to encourage him, so Bill thought. She wasn't drunk, but in her own way she was as "daft" as he was. When Charley suggested that it might be necessary for him to change his name, she agreed enthusiastically and the two of them discussed with desperate gravity what name would be most suitable.

Bill's hopes were now pinned on that telegram he had sent me. He wanted to go to the station and stay there, meeting every train until I should appear. But he dared not. He was more frightened than ever of Eileen's finding out that he had communicated with me.

At last Charley's energy flagged. He lapsed into silence, and his eyelids drooped. Eileen got up, and tiptoed towards him, but, before she reached him, he suddenly rose, and, swaying slightly on his

feet, announced with a curious pomposity that he was going to retire. He started unbuttoning his coat and waistcoat.

He might have taken off all his clothes in front of them, Bill supposed, if Eileen hadn't guided him gently out of the room and upstairs. Bill followed and went into the bedroom which he shared with his wife.

When she joined him, Bill was already in bed. He had heard her fussing after Charley's needs and afterwards tidying up in the sitting room. He pretended to be asleep.

After she had snuffed out the candle by her bedside, he lay awake for what seemed to him like hours on end, tortured by anxiety and self-reproach. At some point he must have fallen asleep, for suddenly he was sitting up, listening to the sound of voices. He put on the gaslight and looked at his watch. It was half-past two.

He went down to the sitting room and found Charley and Eileen standing there. Charley was fully dressed, and his suitcase was on the floor beside him. Eileen was wearing a robe over her nightdress. She was clutching at Charley's arm, imploring him not to leave, telling him that he couldn't "walk out like this" in the middle of the night.

Charley appealed to Bill, explaining that he was engaged to appear in a play "tonight" and had to get back to London without delay. Indeed, he feared he might already be late.

Plainly, Charley had come to his senses, although his brain was still so befuddled that he had no idea what time it was or how long he had been there. Bill set out patiently to make him understand that the performance "tonight" was over and that it was now 2:30 in the morning of the next day. Charley appeared stunned. He sank into a chair, and sat quite still, his face expressionless. Then, with alarming suddenness, he lost control of himself. He started to rage. Why had they allowed him to go to sleep? Did they want to see his career in ruins? Did they want to see him disgraced? And — this was the thing that hurt him most of all — surely they must have known that it was *my* play in which he was engaged to appear, and that I was

one of his greatest friends! How could they have allowed him to let me down so badly?

Eileen burst into tears, and at once Charley was all sympathy and contrition. He apologized humbly. Eileen had been an angel to him. And Bill was his best friend — and always would be. What had happened was his own fault entirely. Anyway it was no use crying over spilt milk.

Through her sobs, Eileen asked Charley over and over again why he no longer wanted to stay with them. It struck Bill — and didn't surprise him either — that Charley had no more than the dimmest recollection of his drunken talk about giving up the stage. Still, Charley yielded to Eileen's persistent reproaches. He declared that, of course, he would be delighted to stay with the Sandersons for as long as they could "put up with him." Anyway, he explained, he could certainly not go back to London now. He would never dare face me again after the shameful way he had abused my confidence in him and spoiled the chances for success of my "masterpiece."

Bill couldn't be certain whether Charley meant what he said or whether he was merely trying to comfort Eileen. At any rate Eileen *was* comforted. Impulsively she flung her arms round Charley's neck and kissed and hugged him. Charley looked startled and was as little responsive as he could be without offending her. He suggested that they should all go back to bed. They would discuss what was to become of him in the morning.

For Bill the situation was more unbearable than ever. He was afraid that Charley might really decide to stay indefinitely, especially when he considered how strenuously Eileen would try to persuade him to do so.

Bill thought there was a chance that I had caught the midnight train from London and he decided to meet it.

Eileen was asleep, when he crawled stealthily out of bed, and he dressed quietly and crept downstairs.

If Eileen challenged him later he had an excuse ready, so he told me now. He would say that he was needed at the office earlier than

usual, and had not liked to wake her, knowing what a disturbed night she had had.

I thought it improbable she would ever believe this tall story. Anyway, as I pointed out to him, I had to call at the house in order to persuade Charley to leave, and Eileen would be bound to guess then that it was Bill who had sent for me. How else could I have learned where Charley was?

He sat, his head bowed, staring into his empty teacup. At last he looked up, saying doggedly, "You needn't admit I told you, any road."

I felt sorry for him. He was loyal, trusting, loving, unselfish — and for these very qualities he was being penalized. "Tell you what," I said, suddenly struck by the thought. "Your wife will have to go out sometime during the morning to do the shopping, won't she?"

"Aye, I expect she will. Usually she leaves about half-past nine, but she may be late this morning."

"Well, if I time my arrival for, say, ten o'clock, there's a chance I'll find Charley alone. I might be able to whisk him away before she returns."

"That would be champion," he said, his face lighting up. But then he added mournfully, "Aye. . . . But happen she won't dare leave Charley alone."

"Try to look on the cheerful side of things," I said. "Anyhow you'd better lend me your key in case your wife's out when I arrive, and Charley doesn't feel like answering the doorbell."

He produced the key hesitantly from an inner pocket. "I'll leave it for you at the office on my way back." I glanced at my watch. "I'm afraid I've made you late. It's already quarter to nine."

He jumped to his feet. "Now, I shouldn't be surprised if I've lost my job into the bargain."

"I'll treat you to a taxi," I said, as we hurried out of the station. "I mean the theater management will. That's the least they can do. We owe you a lot, you know."

He reluctantly agreed. As I put him into a taxi, he said to me that he bore Charley no ill will, and would always think of him with affection. He wanted Charley to know as much. But he did not want him ever to come to his house again. He hoped I would make that clear to Charley.

CHAPTER XI

MY FIRST MOVE was to reserve a private first-class carriage on the twelve o'clock train, due in London at teatime. I had decided we must travel in as secluded a fashion as possible.

After that, I spent some time reading a morning newspaper. There was a brief account of last night's debacle, but I was relieved to note that our explanation of Charley's absence had been accepted without question.

When it was nearly ten o'clock, I hired a taxi to drive me to the Sandersons' home in Blackley and wait there. No one came to answer the door, so I let myself in with Bill's key.

Charley was not in the sitting room, which was now spick and span. I could hardly visualize it as the scene of last night's emotional orgy. No brandy bottle had been left to ruffle its cosy respectability. There was a wooden plaque prominently displayed above the mantelpiece inscribed in fancy lettering "Keep smiling, rain or shine."

I embarked on a systematic search, discovered the kitchen at the back of the house, and also the staircase leading to the upper floor. Although I called out to Charley several times, there was no sound except the insistent ticking of the kitchen clock.

At last I found him in the spare room, which was very small and crowded with cheap and shabby furniture, including a narrow iron bedstead.

Charley was in bed, lying flat on his stomach, with his face buried in the pillow. He was breathing heavily. He was wearing a dressing gown, and was only partially covered by a single sheet, the rest of the bedclothes having fallen off the bed. His pajamas lay in a

rumpled heap on the floor. A tray bearing the remains of a breakfast of tea, toast and marmalade was on the upright chair by the head of the bed. There were two or three sodden cigarette butts in the saucer of the teacup.

"Charley!" I said.

He didn't stir, but snored more loudly.

"Charley!" I repeated with no better result.

I went up to him, took him by the shoulders, shook him, and tried to turn him round. "Charley! It's me, Paul. Wake up! I want to talk to you."

He said nothing but his snoring ceased with remarkable abruptness, and, since he was agile in resisting my attempts to move him, I knew he was awake and must have heard me calling him.

"Charley!" I urged. "For God's sake, pull yourself together and be reasonable. You can't stay here."

He lifted his head a little then. "Please go away, Paul," he said in a muffled, agonized tone of voice. "I'm disgraced. I've failed you. I've no excuse."

"Listen, Charley! Excuses aren't necessary. If you'll behave like a sensible chap, this whole unfortunate business can be forgotten."

"How can it be? Everyone must know."

"On the contrary, no one knows — except Angus and Fraser and myself. The real story will never get out as long as you don't stay away any longer. Whatever the reason for all this, I'm sure you didn't mean to let us down. I'm sure you'll want to do everything you can now to keep the play running successfully. I've got a private carriage for us on the twelve o'clock train. So come along."

He buried his head in the pillow once more.

I moved away, thinking I had better give him time to consider. I saw his suitcase standing at the foot of the bed. The lid was open, and I glanced down at the contents. Evidently they had been collected hurriedly and quite unmethodically. Besides a few articles of hosiery, I noticed an old golf ball, an ash tray, a bedside lampshade, a book or two and what looked like a pot of glue!

"Well, Charley," I resumed, when I had wearied of waiting. "Are you coming?"

He raised himself on his elbows, resting his head in his hands. He didn't reply at once, but when he did his voice sounded less tortured than it had before.

"I don't deserve to get off so lightly. But if you and Angus are really prepared to overlook this — lapse?"

"We are."

"I couldn't face recriminations, Paul. Not by word — or even by look."

"I promise you there won't be any."

"Very well, then," he said conclusively. "You may depend on me. I'll be back tonight, and I'll try to give you the performance of my life."

But he didn't move.

"Hadn't you better start getting dressed?"

"I'll meet you at the station, Paul," he said with elaborate casualness, swinging himself into a sitting position so that now he faced me. Though his eyes were puffy and his complexion pasty and the marks of Renee's scratches were still faintly visible, I was surprised that he looked as well as he did.

"I have a taxi waiting," I said firmly.

"I'll make my own way to the station. The early afternoon train will get me back in plenty of time for the performance."

"No doubt. But I've reserved a private carriage on the twelve o'clock train."

"I'm sorry, Paul. I won't be ready to leave by then. I have to say good-by to my host and hostess."

"You mean your hostess, don't you?"

It was a shot in the dark, but it was effective. He was dumbfounded, and I pursued my advantage with relish. "Before Eileen went out, she made you promise that you'd stay here, didn't she? Now you feel you ought to wait until she gets home so that you can tell her you've changed your mind again. Charley, if I

let you do that, I couldn't be certain you'd ever get away from here."

"How do you know all this?" He asked the question quietly, though he still looked astonished. Then he added, in a burst of somewhat infantile bad temper, "You must have been spying on me — peeping in at keyholes."

"My dear Charley, don't be absurd. I know only what Bill chose to tell me."

"Bill?" he exclaimed with startling force. "Has Bill been talking to you?"

"Of course. How else do you imagine I could have found out where you were?"

"I've no idea," he replied quickly.

And that was the extraordinary truth. Any other man in his predicament, I thought, would have demanded to know at once how on earth he'd been tracked down. Apparently the question hadn't even occurred to Charley. Now that he knew the answer, he still wasn't interested. Only one thing mattered to him: what had Bill told me about him and Eileen?

He was silent for a second or two — seemingly at a loss for words. When he spoke again, there was no more trace of aggressiveness in his manner. "Paul, does Bill know that — has he complained to you?"

"I wouldn't put it quite like that. He knows that Eileen's fallen for you. She's made that abundantly clear to him. In fact, she's treated him abominably. But he hasn't *complained* to me. For one thing, he's too loyal — loyal to you as well as to Eileen. It was out of consideration for your interests that he sent for me, and you ought to be damned grateful to him. Besides, he doesn't think you're aware his wife has this passion for you. At least, he doesn't think you've encouraged her intentionally."

He let his head fall back on the pillow, and lay still, his eyes focused on the ceiling.

I hadn't any doubt now that he was guilty of at least some measure

of misbehavior with Eileen, and it seemed to me more important than ever to get him out of the house at once. I decided to continue playing on his conscience.

"Why should you want to hurt Bill? He strikes me as a thoroughly decent little chap, and he trusts you implicitly."

In an instant he was sitting up again, stung by my words. "You needn't preach to the converted," he said with an aroused Lancashire accent. "Happen I know Bill better than you do. He was my best friend, understand. He's worth a dozen or more of your London toffs."

"In that case, why don't you leave his wife alone?"

"What's that got to do with you?" he shouted, heaving himself out of bed.

I was afraid I had gone too far, that I had driven him to the point of violence, but then his rage seemed to ooze out of him. He stood, a half-fearful, half-bewildered look on his face. It was as if the bed had been for him a cover or retreat, where he had enjoyed the illusion of protection from reality. Now, having been lured out of it, he no longer had enough strength or resolve even to be angry.

"You must forgive me for speaking frankly," I said.

He made a gesture of capitulation. "No, Paul, I'm glad you have. I had no idea Bill knew. Otherwise —"

He sat down wearily on the edge of the bed. "I didn't know it myself until this morning. I'd like you to believe that, Paul, whatever else you may think of me. Yesterday is a blank in my mind. I couldn't deny what she said — the things she reminded me of. I tried to — but it wasn't any use. I tried to tell her she was behaving like a silly little goose. It was all too late — after what had happened. I should have been more brutal, I suppose. I simply couldn't bring myself to hurt her feelings. She swore to me that Bill knew nothing and could never find out."

He was speaking painfully and disconnectedly. I did not interrupt him, because I knew he would not move until he had had his say.

Besides I had no wish to prompt him to put into plainer words what I already judged to be a confession that he had seduced or, more accurately, perhaps, had been seduced by, his friend's wife.

I stood leaning against the door, my eyes fixed on the ground. I didn't want to hear any more, but I felt impelled to listen. In a curious way I was sympathetic. My reason told me that here was a man devoid of principle and deserving no pity, but some other and stronger instinct made me believe that here was a man foredoomed to suffer agonies of repentance for sins beyond his control.

"I wouldn't have had this happen for the world, Paul," he continued. "I wouldn't have come here in the first place if I'd realized there was any danger of it. I can't remember why I came. Bill's important to me, you know. In a way he's the only real friend I have left. We knew each other before I ever thought of going on the stage. And those weren't such bad times, looking back on them. I knew where I was with people then. Either they liked me for myself — or they left me alone. They didn't worry their heads about my position. They weren't always expecting me to be someone quite different. I wasn't on show for them."

He paused, apparently pursuing the trail of his thoughts wordlessly. "Perhaps, I'd be better off if I'd never had any success," he said. "Being famous hasn't meant much happiness for me. The last thing on earth I wanted to do was to steal Eileen from Bill. I was delighted he'd married such an attractive wife. Paul, what shall I do?"

His face wore that same perplexed expression as on other occasions when he had sought my advice.

"There's only one thing for you to do," I said, "and that is to leave this house as quickly as possible."

"Without saying good-by?"

"You can't do any good by seeing Eileen again."

"I hope this is impartial advice, Paul." He smiled wryly. "You're not just saying it because you want to get me on that twelve o'clock train?"

"As a matter of fact," I said slowly, "it's what Bill himself would want. He's scared stiff of his wife finding out he sent for me. If you have any consideration for him, you'll let Eileen think you left of your own accord. That's the best thing you can possibly do for Bill."

"You're right, Paul," he said, turning away. "I'm obliged to you for being so candid."

He fished in his dressing-gown pocket for a cigarette, lit it, and then started to get ready to leave. I looked at my watch. It was nearly eleven o'clock.

"When will Eileen be back?" I asked.

"She said she'd be gone about an hour, I think. She left the house a few minutes before you arrived."

"You'd better get a move on then. I'll wait downstairs."

In less than a quarter of an hour he was dressed. He looked presentable enough, though his suit was crumpled. He scribbled a note for Eileen, leaving it perched on the mantelpiece.

"I've just told her that I have to go," he said, "and that we cannot see each other again because of Bill. I've asked her to forgive me. Do you think that's all right?"

"Yes," I said hastily.

We stopped at the Northern Dyestuffs Company so that I might return Bill's key. Bill met me in the entrance hall, and I assured him that his wife would never know he had been responsible for Charley's departure. Bill's gratitude and relief were pathetic.

When I rejoined Charley in the taxi, he was slumped down, his hat over his eyes and his hands covering his face.

We reached the station in good time and I shepherded him into our carriage. He lay down to get some sleep.

Thus I brought him back to London undamaged. His career was apparently out of jeopardy, the glitter of his fame and position remained untarnished. He could face his countless admirers with head unbowed.

That night he reappeared in my play. Thanks to the assurance that he would be back, the house was packed. Charley excelled himself.

The play, with him to guarantee its popular appeal, ran for seven months and provided a firm foundation for my career as a dramatist. Charley didn't miss another performance.

I often wondered what had happened in the Sandersons' home after Charley's devastating invasion. I did not see or hear from Bill again nor did I discuss him with Charley. Many years later, however, I did learn something of what had happened to him.

In the early summer of 1932, for reasons which will appear later, Charley was desperate. I was then trying to get assistance for him from some of his old friends. I approached Jasper Blake, now living in London and a power in the industrial world.

"Poor old Charley!" Jasper said. "Whatever his faults, parsimony isn't one of them. If he hadn't been so keen on endowing all his friends and hangers-on in his palmy days, he'd probably have a bit left over now in spite of the women and the wine and all the rest of it. Incidentally, it might be worth your while getting in touch with Sanderson."

"Sanderson!" I exclaimed, a distant memory rushing to the forefront of my mind. "You mean Bill Sanderson?"

"Yes. Charley loaned him the money to buy himself a partnership in a small dyestuffs works. That was just before the war. Sanderson's one of the few honest chaps in this world, and he tried to pay the money back, but Charley flatly refused to accept it. Sanderson hasn't heard a word from Charley since. The little man came to see me the other day when he was in London. He's doing pretty well, I gather. He sold out his business to the ICI combine. Got a lump sum for it, plus a delegate directorship in the new outfit."

"What made him come and see you?"

"He wrote me out of the blue asking me if I could give his son a job."

"His son?"

"Yes — the only child. About seventeen or eighteen, I'd say, and the apple of his father's eye. Handsome lad. The mother died when this boy was born. Sanderson never married again. He's brought the boy up singlehanded. Couldn't have been easy for him."

"No," I said abstractedly. Eileen's death, I was thinking, must have taken place less than a year after I had gone to the Sanderson's house in search of Charley, if Jasper's estimate of the boy's age was correct. I began to toy with conjectures. "What's Bill like now?" I asked as abstractedly as before.

"Oh, typical Manchester businessman, you could say. Bald as an egg. Much fatter than I remembered him. I doubt if you'd recognize the shy and nervous junior clerk we once knew."

"I suppose not."

"You might sound a bit more interested," Jasper laughed good-naturedly.

The rebuke was deserved, for I was thinking of Bill Sanderson's son.

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P A R T T H R E E

Lise

CHAPTER XII

A FEW DAYS after my return from Manchester, I invited Lise Stael to luncheon, as I had promised myself I would.

She seemed to take it for granted that we were met only to discuss the Stranleighs. Almost as soon as we were seated in the restaurant, she remarked, "I understand the sheep strayed a record distance this time and that you brought him back to the fold."

She made me tell her the story, and then she started talking about Renee. Renee, she explained bluntly, was by instinct a sexual pervert, but was bitterly ashamed of it. Thus she suffered at once from a gnawing sense of guilt and from frustrated physical yearnings. All the overt evidence of her neurotic state — her alcoholism and the rest — was but indicative of these twin afflictions.

Her resentment of Charley's infidelities was born not of jealousy, but of defensiveness. She hated to be reminded that she was sexually an unsatisfactory wife, and that thus Charley had every excuse to be unfaithful to her. In other words, she was desperately concerned to assert a normality that did not exist in her. As a result, she had a habit of imputing to others the vice she was at such pains to conceal in herself. This explained what she had told Lise about me.

"I see."

"Do you? Do you see that she's busy the whole time in a frantic effort to divest herself of guilt? That, my friend, is the whole secret."

Lise developed her theory with gleeful lucidity. Her approach was scientific. Though her probing of Renee's suffering was pitiless, it was the pitilessness not of the gossip, but of the butterfly-catcher.

Our luncheon was a long-drawn-out affair. I found her company

stimulating, and I was so engrossed in our talk that I was hardly conscious of how long a time we sat talking. But as soon as she had left me, I was ashamed and felt morally debased by her patent duplicity and luxuriance in the misfortunes of others, which I had condoned, even encouraged.

She was leaving town next day to spend the rest of the summer with friends in Deauville. I had promised before we parted that I would get in touch with her on her return. Now I decided that this was just a formal pledge that I need not honor.

However, it happened that as a young dramatist who had written a successful first play and was known to have a second play scheduled for production I had begun to attract some attention from the social game hunters by the autumn. In these circumstances it was inevitable that I should run into Lise Stael sooner or later. I did so at the very beginning of October when we were both guests at one of those parties in Belgravia intended for any practitioner of the Arts who was socially acceptable by reason of prosperity. Lise went out of her way to be agreeable, and our acquaintance thus renewed developed by degrees into an odd, short-lived but close friendship. We were often together during the last months of 1913 and the early months of 1914.

I never really got to like her, though I suppose I might have been slave to a passion for her had she willed it. I was always conscious of her physical appeal, which, I decided, must be the product of her intense vitality and indestructible self-confidence. I could not account for it in any other way. I had no particular admiration for her looks. My original estimate of them stood. I thought she was too roughly and solidly hewn to be in any wise beautiful.

For me, however, she was sexually unapproachable. This was not because I believed her too virtuous. Her own outspokenness assured me she was nothing of the kind, and reputedly she was or had been the mistress of that official of the Austrian Embassy with whom I had first met her at the Stranleighs' house. But I sensed that she had no

interest in me as a potential lover and that, if I were to make advances to her, I would automatically forfeit her respect which, against my better judgment, I valued. She would have considered me weak and stupid.

Weakness and stupidity were, in her estimation, the two unforgivable sins. Equally, she admired their opposites and seemed inclined to identify them. Thus, while she had no patience, generally speaking, with philistinism and recruited her friends from the intelligentsia, her judgment became blinded in the face of power.

I used to meet writers, painters, and musicians at her little house in St. John's Wood, where she entertained a great deal on a modest scale; Algernon Hart, my old friend from Oxford days, was among the last-named. But I also met financiers, industrialists, politicians and high-ranking military officers whom Lise had gone out of her way to cultivate. The mere fact that they were powerful was to her sufficient recommendation of them.

By contrast her preoccupation with the Stranleighs seemed inexplicable. Yet she continued to see as much of them as ever, and most of what I knew about their affairs I learned from her. Charley was guilty of no more apparent "lapses" while my play lasted, and had I judged from the occasional conversations I had with him when I looked in on him at the theater or when we lunched together (it was tacitly understood between us that I should not be welcome at his house), I might have imagined that a sudden calm had descended on his marriage, for he never mentioned Renee to me except *en passant*. But Lise told me that life in the Stranleigh household was becoming increasingly discordant.

On one occasion when I had tea with her, she complained of being exhausted as a result of having sat up with Renee all night. "She really is getting quite impossible," she said. "She telephoned at one o'clock in the morning to tell me she was going to kill herself. I decided it would be simpler to go and see her than listen to the telephone ringing for the rest of the night."

"She never would commit suicide, would she?"

"Of course not. She's even more frightened of dying than she is of living. Anyway by the time I arrived she'd changed her mind. It was Charley she was going to kill. I told her it would be foolish to kill the goose that laid the golden egg."

"What had Charley done this time?"

"Oh, nothing in the least exciting. Either he'd come home after the theater and walked out again or he hadn't come home at all. The stories repeat themselves. Poor Renee! She won't reconcile herself to the thought that Charley can't be faithful to an iceberg. I tell you, she's becoming impossible."

"Impossible" was her favorite word for describing Renee. I asked her why she continued to see Renee, since she found her company so disagreeable. Her reply was evasive. "I really have no idea," she said, her face set in a characteristically unyielding expression. "I used to think she wasn't nearly as silly as most women. Perhaps, it was the masculinity in her that appealed to me, a certain tartness of manner. Even now she isn't always tiresome."

Lise expressed no pity for Charley, but she was not so contemptuous of his frailties as she was of Renee's. She seemed to think that his physical beauty excused them or should be accepted as sufficient compensation for them. His physical beauty, as a phenomenon in itself, excited her admiration. "You know," she said with that faint suggestiveness she sometimes chose to convey, "Renee should at least cherish him as a decoration. When she starts scratching his face it's worse than vulgar; it is pure vandalism, don't you think? I'd rather have an undamaged Charley in my drawing room than my own portrait by Augustus John. I could sit and gaze at him for hours."

I never met Renee at Lise's house. As it happened, I never met Charley there either. However, one evening shortly before Christmas when I came to fetch her, she told me that had I arrived an hour earlier I should have seen him.

"How on earth did you persuade Renee to come all the way to St. John's Wood?" I asked.

"Renee wasn't here." Her tone was almost smug.

"Oh?"

"She was just the subject of conversation. Charley doesn't know what to do about her. He's at his wits' end — poor fellow. He came to ask my advice."

"Well, that's something I'd never be guilty of," I said teasingly. "I can't imagine your making a very sympathetic audience if I wanted to pour my heart out."

"You're wrong," she said unsmilingly. "I didn't encourage him to cry on my shoulder. But I gave him what he asked for."

"What?"

"Obviously, I told him he ought to leave Renee. That's the only sensible advice anyone could give him, isn't it?"

"Yes. But you say he won't take it."

"Oh, he may," she remarked lightly. "If he gets sufficient encouragement."

She changed the subject then, but from various hints she dropped on later occasions I gathered she was acting as Charley's Father Confessor as well as Renee's. Once I asked her outright whether Renee knew of her meetings with Charley. She merely gave me a look as much as to say "Make up your own mind — if you're interested."

I found her obstinately enigmatic. For all her cult of frankness, I had the impression that she never uttered a word that had not been weighed beforehand and that she probably held back more than she disclosed.

One morning towards the end of March, I telephoned to ask whether she would care to come to the opening of my new play next week. The Wainwright play had been withdrawn at the beginning of the month, and Charley was now idle.

Her manner on the telephone was always inclined to be cold and abrupt, but this time it was more than usually so. The way she declined my invitation was positively rude.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

After a brief pause, she spoke rapidly, in a businesslike tone. "Listen, Paul. I think you'd better keep this to yourself for the time

being, although I've no doubt it will be all over London in a day or two. Charley's with me. He's left Renee. We're going away to the country together for a few weeks. We shan't be back in time for your first night. . . ."

The news spread quickly within theatrical circles. Before a week was passed, some oblique hints at it had even been published in the popular press. Renee was the source of most of what was said. During the month that Lise and Charley were out of town, she took full advantage of a clear field to level her charges against them.

Her allegations boomeranged, however, because it turned out she had never been popular and "everyone knew" what a dreadful dance she had led poor Charley.

The general assumption was that his liaison with Lise should not be judged on the sordid level of a common intrigue; indeed that it deserved to be classed with the classic affairs of history. From what cause this romantic fancy sprang I could not tell — unless it was that both of them were celebrated in their own right. I realized, however, with what frightening patience and calculation Lise must have laid siege to Charley. I did not understand her motives, but I felt certain that they were purely rapacious. While I could well believe that she had a physical passion for him and found the possession of him flattering to her ego, I did not suppose for a moment that she was genuinely in love with him.

For Renee I felt no sympathy. Apart from the fact that I disliked her, I imagined that losing Charley would be to her ultimate advantage, since she would be forced to pull herself together now that she could no longer afford to indulge her neurosis. This was a silly point of view — though I did have brief cause to believe it justified, for at the end of April I read that Renee Logan had started rehearsing for a new play. Some ten days later, however, came an ominous announcement that illness had forced her to withdraw from the cast.

About this time Algernon Hart told me he had run into Charley

and Lise on the previous Sunday afternoon, taking a walk in Regent's Park. He had never met Charley before, but he knew Lise well, and his attitude towards her was more sentimental than mine. "Obviously he's the love of her life," he said. "She could hardly take her eyes off him. Her whole personality seemed changed. You could almost describe her now as the clinging type."

He had gathered that they wanted seclusion for the time being. Lise had canceled several concert engagements, he knew; and she had made no suggestion that a visit from him in the near future would be welcome.

A week later Charley telephoned me.

"Paul, you old rascal," he said without explanation or preliminaries, "where on earth have you been? We want you to come and see us very soon."

"I'd like to."

"How have you been, Paul?"

"Fine, thanks. And you?"

"Oh, I've never been better in my whole life." He spoke dramatically. "I've not seen your new play yet, you know. But I've read golden reports of it. It's a *succès fou*, I understand."

"Oh, it's going pretty well," I said, remembering amusedly how often I had heard Lise use the expression *succès fou*.

"Do you happen to be free for luncheon tomorrow?"

"I . . . let me see . . ."

"One o'clock at the club. Try not to make any early afternoon engagements, old fellow, because we've a lot to talk about."

"All right."

"That's gradely, lad," he said, and added paternally, "you'd better come prepared, my dear Paul, to give me a full account of all your doings in the past two months."

"I will," I said, and wondered as I replaced the receiver for what else I ought to come prepared.

CHAPTER XIII

CHARLEY had not entered the Garrick Club, to which I had been elected at his proposal a few months earlier, since word of his flight with Lise first got round. So his reappearance caused a well-bred stir among the members present. Some made conscious efforts not to stare; others greeted him with such forced exclamations as "Charley, old man! How *are* you? Where have you been hiding yourself?"

"I assume there's no real mystery about it," he whispered to me as we went into the dining room together.

He was looking extremely well; his face was sunburned and still remarkably youthful. To judge from his manner he might have been a man who hadn't a care in the world.

I learned that he was to play Hamlet in mid-June; rehearsals were due to start next week. That was the only real piece of news he gave me during luncheon.

For the rest of the time, I listened to a running protestation of his happiness with Lise, of his resolve to give up alcohol, of his confidence that he would be worthy of his good fortune from now on. I was reminded of that afternoon in Oxford years ago when he had told me of his marriage to Renee. Outwardly, he had given the impression then of brutal unconcern, but I had detected an element of bravado, a suggestion that he was trying to convince himself that he had acted wisely. Now, as then, I felt there was more assertiveness than confidence in what he was saying.

"You haven't got to run away, have you?" he said after the meal was over.

"My afternoon's at your disposal, Charley. Why don't we go up to the library?"

As we mounted the narrow back staircase, he confessed he had never been in the library. I told him it was high time he saw it. "I imagine it's as good a bijou theatrical collection as you'd be likely to find anywhere," I said.

The moment we were inside, he took a deep breath of the faintly musty air, as if in tribute to the atmosphere of erudition and the hallowed past. Then he started on a ponderous inspection of the bookshelves. I settled down comfortably in one of the armchairs by the fireplace, and put my feet up on the high, leather-upholstered fender.

"The master would have been in paradise here, wouldn't he, Paul?"

Charley was idly fingering a volume of playbills.

"Good Heavens! I haven't thought of Norman Grant for years. I wonder what ever happened to his own collection?"

"He left it to me — as a matter of fact. I've never quite known what to do with it. Perhaps I should donate it to the club. I'd want it kept separately, and called the Norman Grant collection. He'd have liked that. He was a great man in his way, Paul. Don't you agree?"

"He was certainly an excellent teacher."

"Ah, yes." He replaced the volume of playbills, and stood gazing about him. "So many books unread!" he sighed.

He offered me a cigarette and took one for himself. "Paul, do you think I've treated Renee very badly?"

"Well, as far as I'm able to judge she brought it on herself."

"You see, I still can't forget I owe her a great deal. Naturally it's difficult for Lise to understand that. She wants me to divorce Renee. She's been told by a lawyer friend of hers that I have sufficient grounds."

"For an annulment, you mean?"

"I suppose so — I'm not up on the legal technicalities. In any case I haven't the heart to do it."

He sat watching me with searching eyes.

"To be perfectly honest with you, Charley, I can't see the slightest reason why Lise should be protected. Why should she shrink from being cited as co-respondent? After all — "

"Oh, you ought to know Lise better than that. But Renee's not giving her the chance. Renee refuses to consider a divorce. She won't even discuss the matter."

"Well, I certainly don't think Renee has any right to hold on to you."

"Then you think I should do what Lise suggests?"

"Oh, I can't possibly advise you on that, Charley. It would be an unsavory case, of course, and Renee's reputation would be dragged through the mud. On the other hand, there's Lise to be considered. If she wants her position legalized, as I suppose she does — "

"She doesn't mind about her *own* position, Paul. Darling Lise has no respect for the conventions. That's one of the things I find so adorable about her. She didn't ask me to leave Renee even when she knew she was going to have a child."

"A child?" I exclaimed, leaning forward. It was as though a light had suddenly been turned on in my mind. Momentarily, I was dazzled by it.

"That's not for publication," he said with a slight frown.

"No, of course not." I sat back again.

"The fact is," he resumed, "that Lise wanted to have my child regardless of the consequences. She was prepared to go through with it on her own. I don't think one could possibly ask a greater proof of a woman's love, do you?"

I was no longer dazzled. The significance of what he was saying was clearer to me, I thought, than it would likely ever be to him.

"Of course, there wasn't any doubt in my mind what I should do. Whatever my obligations to Renee, I obviously had a higher responsibility to Lise. You see that?"

"Certainly."

"I mustn't pretend it was a hard decision to make. It was the

reverse of a sacrifice. It was just one of those rare occasions, Paul, when duty happens to correspond with desire."

"Is the baby expected soon?"

"In September."

"You must be very happy about it."

"I am, Paul," he said quietly. "But I don't consider the morals of the parents should be visited on the children. Just because Lise and I are prepared to do without a legal blessing of our union, it doesn't follow that our child will enjoy being illegitimate."

"Does Lise feel as you do?"

"Yes, Paul, she does. As strongly as I do now that our elopement's a *fait accompli*."

"And that's why she's trying to persuade you to bring this annulment suit?"

"Yes — but I won't do it. Not unless everything else fails." He got up, and moved to the window.

"What other solution is there?" I said.

He turned round slowly. "Would you be willing to help me, Paul?"

"How?" I expected some impossible request.

"I wouldn't dream of asking you this, my dear fellow, if you weren't a friend of Lise's as well as mine. But Renee won't agree even to *meet* Lise or me. So —"

"No, Charley!" I jumped up. "I'm willing to do anything within reason, but I won't go to Renee as your emissary —"

"I don't want you to. No, I've been thinking of a neutral intermediary. Someone like Angus Ross. If he'd speak to her —"

"Why don't you ask him?"

"I wondered if you would, Paul?"

"You want me to ask Angus?" I laughed shortly. "Well, I will, if you like. But it seems a ridiculously involved way of going about things. After all, you know him almost as well as I do."

He looked at me steadily. "I'm not much good at personal confidences, Paul. You're one of the very few people in the world I

can talk to frankly. I'd never be able to explain the situation to Angus myself."

As usual, I couldn't refuse him. "Very well, Charley," I said resignedly, "I'll see if I can get hold of him for you this evening."

"That's most awfully good of you, Paul. I knew I could count on you." He clapped me on the back, and then took out his pocket watch. "Do you know it's already four o'clock? Why don't we go down and have some tea, old fellow?"

Angus Ross agreed to intercede with Renee, though he saw no reason why he should and said he couldn't think why he was going to. He liked Renee and, although he had heard rumors about her extravagant behavior, he had seen her only at her best. Besides he had a fixed idea that Charley had driven her to excesses and that, but for him, she would be a perfectly normal woman. Charley he saw as a charming, irresponsible and feckless creature from whom women should be protected. "Why did she ever marry that hopeless fellow?" he said, looking at me as though I were somehow to blame. "I imagine she feels a bit bitter. You would, too, wouldn't you, Hunter — if your best friend ran off with your wife? However — I'll advise her if you like that the most crushing revenge she can possibly have on Fraulein what's-her-name is to allow the girl to marry Charley. You mark my words, Hunter. A year from now, the *second* Mrs. Stranleigh will be a drunkard."

But he was by no means so lighthearted when we discussed the matter again a week later. I found him in his office engaged in a conference with his stage manager, a scene designer, and Fraser. Characteristically he invited me to join in, although the subject under discussion was no concern of mine, for he had a genial conviction that whatever interested him must axiomatically interest the rest of humanity. But he didn't suggest to the others that they should stay and hear what he had to tell me. He stood with his hands in his pockets and his lips pursed, while he waited for the sound of their voices, beyond the closed door, to fade into the distance.

Then he said, "Now, Hunter, about your friend Stranleigh. I think you'd better tell him to come and talk to me. He'll have to do something unless he's prepared to see his wife locked up. There's not the least doubt in my mind that she's going insane." He sat down opposite me, his elbows on the table and his hands clasped.

"Well, she always has been unbalanced," I said. "She made life impossible for him."

"Really?" He looked at me severely. "Well, it's not for me to judge the ethics of the case. I can only tell you that if I were in Stranleigh's place I should feel extremely alarmed. She behaved far more oddly than any drunkard I've ever seen. When she wasn't launched on a diatribe against Charley and his woman, she was laughing. She shrieked with laughter when I said how-do-you-do and when I said good-by. She nearly split her sides with laughter when I said I took no milk or sugar in my tea. You might have felt yourself a very witty fellow, Hunter, if you'd been in my place."

He frowned when I smiled. "But I'm sure you'd also have been shocked."

"Is there no one looking after her?"

"She has some dreadful woman living in the house with her. God knows where she found her! The woman's alleged to be a painter, but she looked to me more like a football player — and they call each other by their surnames. She didn't speak more than a few words the whole time I was there. But it seemed to me she was pretty good at keeping Renee's glass filled."

"What's this woman's name?" I asked.

"Renee calls her 'Smithers.' I imagine if she has a Christian name, it's something irreproachably feminine like Euphemia."

He chuckled shortly, then a pained expression passed over his face. "You don't *really* think Renee's that type, do you, Hunter?"

"Oh no," I replied quickly, realizing that for all his urbanity there was a strong Calvinistic streak in Angus Ross.

"Anyway," he said more cheerfully, getting up from the table, "it's quite certain that Renee's in no condition to be reasoned with

at the moment. So if Stranleigh wants a divorce the first thing he must do is to get her under proper medical care. You tell him that from me."

"And incidentally," he said as he saw me out of the theater, "this isn't only my opinion. I had a word with Hubert Langham after I'd seen her. You probably heard she was going to do a part for him. Well, she didn't resign. She got the sack. Langham felt sorry for her, but there was nothing else for it. He imagines she must have been drunk the whole time."

Charley was distressed when I reported what Ross had said. "Please say that I agree with him absolutely. Of course, Renee's health must come first, and I'm willing to forget the divorce until she's recovered. Tell him I shall be profoundly grateful for any arrangements he can make for her medical care. You *will* make him understand, won't you, Paul, that it's not entirely my fault she's in this state? And that I'm not shirking my duty? But, as you know, Renee absolutely refuses to see or speak to me. I'm helpless."

Once more I was sitting in Ross's office. I had faithfully delivered Charley's message.

"Extraordinary chap!" Ross said. "Why doesn't he come and tell me all this himself? I'm not a revivalist or a schoolmaster, you know, Hunter. I'm the most gentle, unfrightening sort of man. Oh well, it's a damned nuisance, but I suppose I'll have to see Renee again for him. Something's got to be done, though Heaven knows why I should be landed with it."

But he could not persuade Renee to accept medical help. Part of the trouble was Smithers, who exercised a selfish and unholy influence over her. It was impossible to see Renee except in this woman's presence, and her glowering face stiffened Renee's resistance to entreaties.

Nobody seemed to know who Smithers was or where she had come from. The only time I ever saw her was at the first night of Charley's *Hamlet* in mid-June, when I sat in a box with Lise and Algernon.

We arrived early, and languidly watched the house fill up. A large bouquet of flowers, I remember, reposed on the edge of our box, presented to Lise by some well-wisher.

Suddenly Lise said softly to me, "Renee and her lady friend have come into the box opposite. We had better pretend not to have noticed them." She turned to Algernon, presumably to give him the same warning. While she did so, I could not resist stealing a glance in Renee's direction.

She was sitting well forward so that she could be seen by the greater part of the house. She had evidently been at pains to look well: she was wearing a modish evening gown and her coiffure was set off with a diamond tiara. But she had grown almost grotesquely fat and her eyes looked puffy.

Smithers was wearing a green dress, shapeless and ill-fitting. She sat a little behind Renee in an ungainly posture, a hand on each knee. She struck me as unlovely and unfeminine.

Possibly if the curtain had not been late, that dread moment when Lise and Renee caught each other's eye would never have come: but it did and many in the audience must have been waiting for it, because there was an appreciable hush. Renee glared. Her mouth opened, and I feared she was going to shout out some insult. Then Lise turned her gaze on the stalls, and the danger seemed passed.

But Renee, as she soon revealed, had not forced herself to make a public appearance merely in the hope of putting Lise out of countenance. After Charley had delivered his first soliloquy, a shrill, penetrating cry of "Rotten!" rang out. A ghastly pause ensued, while an indescribably pained expression spread over the face, not of Hamlet, but of Charles Stranleigh. Then, as if in an effort to restore his confidence, the audience broke into applause.

Renee left soon afterwards — whether under the management's persuasion or of her own volition I do not know. Anyway, she had achieved her purpose. Charley was devastated; his performance lost its timing, and remained listless and uncertain throughout the rest of the play. The critics let him down as lightly as they could, but

his *Hamlet* had to be written off as a failure. It lasted only a fortnight.

"Perhaps he'll admit now that he has no obligation left to her," Lise said, as we made our way unhappily to the stage door afterwards.

But nothing Lise or anyone else said could induce Charley to bring suit against Renee. His conscience, it seemed, forbade him to forget that he was in her debt. He clung to the futile hope that she might yet recover some measure of reasonableness and consent to a divorce.

I heard nothing further about her until the end of August, when she nearly died. For several weeks before this she had been dangerously ill with alcoholic neuritis, and when the crisis came she had not only lost the use of her arms and legs but was virtually blind. She had no one but Smithers to care for her.

Smithers had either neglected or refused to send for a doctor. When at last she did so it must have been apparent to her that she might otherwise be held accountable for a death, and she cleared out immediately afterwards. By then she had doubtless enriched herself considerably at Renee's expense, for in due course it was discovered that Renee had run through every penny of Charley's money, and was heavily in debt. The house at Hammersmith and its effects were subsequently sold to meet her liabilities.

All this I learned after Charley had rung me up in great agitation to say he had heard from "some doctor" that Renee was in a critical condition and had been taken to hospital. He wanted Angus Ross to make sure that everything possible was being done for her.

For some days it was touch-and-go whether Renee would live and she spent several months in hospital and several more months at a convalescence home in the country. She allowed Charley to visit her at the latter place, and the upshot of their meeting was an amicable agreement. She would divorce him if he would send her back to America as his wife and would allow her a full six months there, during which time she might have the advantage of using his

name to resume her stage career, before called on to institute proceedings.

She sailed for America in May of 1915, and that was virtually the end of her story in so far as it concerned Charley. I do not know that she ever tried to keep her side of the bargain; certainly it was not kept. Early in 1917, at a time when the newspapers were crowded with flaring reports of world destruction, I happened to see a brief dispatch from Hollywood saying that Mrs. Charles Stranleigh, professionally known as Renee Logan, was dead, following a long illness.

CHAPTER XIV

SHORTLY AFTER Charley began rehearsing for his ill-starred *Hamlet*, Lise invited me to luncheon at the house in St. John's Wood which she now shared with her lover. I had not yet seen them together and I expected to find them by themselves. However, when I arrived I realized that their insistence on seclusion must be over.

There were nine guests besides myself, all of whom I had met with Lise at one time or another. They included Algernon Hart, a K.C. and his wife, a woman writer of popular novels and a youngish politician who was an Under-Secretary of State in the Liberal Government. This was like other luncheon parties of Lise's, except that Charley was present to sit at the head of the table in the familiar dining room with its black ceiling and canary-colored walls.

"How are you, dear Paul? I'm so very happy to see you," she greeted me, with a welcoming smile. Yet in its very effusiveness her manner was somehow forbidding. I read in it a warning that she had bolted the door on the memory of all our intimate discussions about the Stranleighs and that now that Charley belonged to her I must accept that fact as though it had always been so.

I agreed with Algernon Hart that her appearance had taken on a new effulgence and softness. When I caught a glimpse of her at one moment during luncheon, I thought that she was almost beautiful. Her fair hair was glazed by a shaft of sunlight, and her blue eyes seemed to be ashine with some inner glow.

Her eyes could not be kept off Charley for long at a time. It was as though she were continually obeying a compulsion to reassure herself that he was still there. Moreover, she took every opportunity to entice him into little amorous flutters — a linking of arms, a touch-

ing of fingers, a quick caress. One might well have supposed her a woman consumedly in love. That, I felt sure, was how she wanted everyone to picture her, including me.

But I could not. I had a preconceived idea that she would radiate no more than an overweening pride of possession, and she did nothing to disabuse me of this. Her attentiveness to him was all physical. She made no pretense of treating him as her intellectual equal. Never once did she ask his opinion or quote it; never once did she encourage him to talk. This was her party, and conversationally she conducted it as though he didn't exist.

I noted with some amusement that she placed next to him at table the two ladies whom he was least likely to find appealing. One was the K.C.'s wife who effectively hid whatever charms she may have possessed behind an intolerable preciosity of manner; the other was the novelist — a middle-aged virgin with that didactic overbearance which often results from the sublimation of sexual desire in careerist success. Charley was polite, but a hunted look spread over his face whenever he found himself stranded in conversation with either of them.

The talk, however, was focused mainly on the politician who was the guest of honor. Charley made only one major contribution to it. After we had meandered back into the living room for coffee, discussion turned to the suffragette movement, and, in reply to the woman novelist, the politician argued that he saw no need to upset the *status quo*, because women already exercised a dominant behind-the-scenes influence over politics. He was interrupted unexpectedly by a resounding voice: "Don't you believe, sir, that the Government's aim should be the greatest possible happiness for the greatest possible number?"

All eyes were turned on Charley. Lise looked surprised and a little anxious. He was standing behind her chair, holding his cup of coffee to his chest.

"Oh yes — I certainly do," the politician said in a tone of voice suggesting he was wary of a trap.

"It was Bentham who coined that phrase, was it not?" Charley continued.

"I believe it was."

"Aren't his writings regarded as the Bible of the Liberal creed?"

"In a sense they are." The politician sounded more cautious than ever.

"Ah, I thought so." Charley inclined his head.

The politician waited courteously for his host to make his point. But all Charley said, after an impressive pause, was, "I'm a Conservative myself."

The effect was extremely comic, but no one so much as smiled until Lise gave the signal. "Darling Charley," she cried, holding out her hand to him, "why have you never told me before?"

There was a burst of laughter then which Lise evidently found far from annoying. Possibly she was saying to herself that such unconsciously amusing sallies might increase Charley's social value to her, as the value of a pet dog is increased if it can perform parlor tricks.

Charley's face remained expressionless. Before the conversation could be resumed he murmured to Lise that he must get back to his rehearsal, kissed her tenderly and shook hands with each of the guests in turn. It was somewhat like the exit of a small son who has been brought down to say how-do-you-do to the grown-up visitors. I was certain he felt humiliated. And I decided I must try to persuade Lise to treat him more tactfully in future.

So I stayed on after the others had left, although she did not suggest that I should. I broached what I wished to say by remarking that Charley had consulted me recently about Renee.

"I'm aware of that," she said in an aloof, almost antagonistic way. It was unmistakable warning that she regarded the Stranleighs as a closed subject between us.

But I did not retreat. Charley, I told her, was full of good resolutions, but he wouldn't honor them unless he had peace of mind. And it would be impossible for him to have peace of mind living with a

woman who outshone him intellectually — unless that woman took good care to conceal the fact. After all, I reminded her, she herself had often said that he was extremely conventional at heart and a believer in such middle-class maxims as “a man should be master in his own house.” But how could he feel master in his own house so long as she treated him in public as though he were a kind of tailor’s dummy — or a court jester? If she continued to ride roughshod over his *amour-propre* he would rebel sooner or later.

“You mean,” she said disdainfully, “he’ll start drinking again and sleeping in brothels — or wherever he did spend the nights when he couldn’t face going home?”

“I do mean that.”

“You flatter me.”

I had succeeded in ruffling her temper; that was all. In the end she asked me to leave, explaining that it was late and that she had a great deal of work to do in preparation for a concert she was giving next week.

“I apologize if I’ve annoyed you,” I said, as I stood in the hall, hat in hand.

“Oh, you haven’t annoyed me one bit,” she replied with a sincerity that I found chilling. “I’m sure your advice was well meant. That’s a horribly commonplace thing to say, isn’t it? But I’m afraid you’ve rather asked for it. You see, my dear, I can’t believe you’ve ever been in love yourself. Otherwise, you’d have realized that to tell me how to treat Charley is presumptuous — and a little silly.” She held the front door open for me. “Good-by, Paul. Forgive me, won’t you, for returning frankness with frankness?”

I thought it inconceivable that Charley’s moral stability, or lack of it, could be a matter of indifference to her. She was going to be the mother of his child. If my suspicion was correct, she had allowed herself to become pregnant for the purpose of weaning him from his wife. And now she was determined to marry him.

Just the same I knew that I should have held my tongue, that I’d only made matters worse, if anything. I had been forewarned. She

would listen to no one who disbelieved in the myth of her great love for Charley, and I couldn't even pretend to believe in it. As I walked away into the dwindling sunlight of the late afternoon, I cursed myself for a fool.

After the *Hamlet* debacle, Charley signed a contract to appear in a new comedy by the author of *The Brighton Way*, and began rehearsing at once. So he and Lise remained in London throughout the summer, and I did too. During June and July I worked on an adaptation of an eighteenth-century ballad opera for which Algernon Hart was to supply the score. Angus Ross planned to produce it in the autumn. I intended to take a holiday in August, but when August came, holidays were no more. This was the year 1914.

Algernon Hart, who was to be my long-time collaborator in the between-war years, was a gifted musician who could never quite conceal the fact that he was also an aristocrat. He had an aristocrat's delicate build and finely moulded features, and, even though he liked to dress eccentrically, one always suspected that the velvet coat, or whatever he happened to be wearing, had been made for him in Saville Row; one felt certain it would be left behind when he returned to the country at the week end. I do not mean that he was a dilettante; he worked hard when he didn't need to work at all, and his music is proof that he didn't work in vain. But he was never entirely of the life he led in Bohemian London. For him this life had a perennially romantic quality about it; it was an escape from the reality of his own background; it was, as it were, a prolonged visit behind the scenes.

It was characteristic of Algernon's attitude to other artists, which was more that of a patron than of a fellow, that he should give Lise's liaison with Charley his enthusiastic blessing and have a naïve belief that it must prosper. This liaison had diminished Lise's circle, for some of her acquaintances would not countenance flaunted sin, and it was considered daring of the Under-Secretary in the Liberal Government to have attended that luncheon at which I'd been

present. Illicit love had imposed a limitation on Lise's social activities and aspirations, and I suspected this might be the real reason she was so anxious to become a wife. But Algernon was certainly not one of those who fought shy of her because she was a mistress. Nothing excited his sympathy more than the flouting by others of conventions which he himself had been brought up to observe and, indeed, would never dream of breaking.

It was also characteristic of his attitude that he should join what might be described as the Charley cult. He had no illusions about Charley's intellectual powers; Lise allowed none of her friends to have that. But apart from perceiving in him those same qualities that had first won my affection, he was attracted to him as a disreputable child of Art whom Lise loved because of his imposing loveliness.

Algernon and I found that we worked well together. Because we shared the idiosyncrasy of being usually at our brightest in the early morning, we formed the habit of meeting for breakfast and spending some time afterwards discussing and developing our ideas. One day early in July he arrived at my rooms in Clarges Street a half hour late and looking sleepy.

"Late night?" I said, as he removed the tin cover from his plate of bacon and eggs.

"And rather stormy."

He didn't speak again until he had swallowed his first cup of coffee. By then I had started glancing through the morning paper.

"I'm afraid our friend Charley may have fallen from grace."

"Oh. Were you with *them*?" I put the paper aside.

"I went to Lise's concert. Her last of the season. The baby can't be far off."

"September."

He finished a mouthful of toast and marmalade. "Well, the Fentons gave a champagne supper for Lise afterwards at the Café Royal. You know what Mary Fenton's like?"

She was the K.C.'s wife.

"Well?"

"She ignored him — that's all; though he sat on her right. However," he emphasized the word, "his attention was very much taken up with his other neighbor. Christine Lingworth. You've met her, haven't you?"

I hadn't, but I knew of her. She had been, in turn, the mistress of a brilliant but poverty-stricken painter and the wife of a doddering but wealthy nobleman. Now, in her early thirties, she was without ties and of independent means, for Lord Lingworth had left her a comfortable annuity. She could live as she pleased, which was said to be promiscuously.

"I'm surprised Lise allowed as attractive a woman as that merry widow to get anywhere near Charley. Or is she becoming careless?"

"Oh, you're incapable of being fair to Lise."

Algernon drained what was left in the coffeepot into his cup. Then he pushed back his chair, and began packing his curved stem pipe.

"Christine left early," he went on. "Charley insisted on seeing her into a taxi. He seemed unusually distraught when he returned. He just sat there drinking down champagne. Suddenly I realized his place was empty. I glanced round, and saw him wandering out of the restaurant. I imagined he'd gone to the lavatory."

He paused to light his pipe. "But he didn't come back, and when the time came for the rest of us to leave, it was obvious that he *wasn't* coming back — that he'd just walked out without a word to Lise or to his host and hostess. Lise passed the whole thing off superbly. She said Charley was tired — and we'd have to forgive him. He'd gone home without saying good-by because he hadn't wanted to break up the party. I drove her home, and she asked me in for a nightcap. She went upstairs first and I guessed she'd been to see whether Charley was in bed — and had found that he wasn't. She was upset, and rather frightened, I thought. I felt she didn't want to be left alone. I must have been with her at least three hours."

He paused, puffing at his pipe.

"Go on," I said.

"Well, at last she heard what I suppose she'd been listening for

from the beginning — the sound of the latchkey. She looked tense, and whispered to me not to go because she might need help. I took her to mean that Charley had probably come home fighting drunk or something. She called his name, but the footsteps went on past the door. She opened the door, and called to him again. . . .”

“I can guess the rest. . . .”

“Can you?”

“Roughly. There was a blazing row . . . and . . .”

“Nothing of the kind.” He pointed the stem of his pipe at me. “When will you learn not to underestimate Lise? She called to him a third time from the hall. He was halfway up the stairs by then. ‘Algernon’s here,’ she said — and that stopped him. He turned round and gazed at her with rather watery eyes. He may have been drunk, but he was still steady on his feet. I was standing in the doorway, but I don’t know whether he saw me. She asked him where he’d been without any hint of reproach in her voice. ‘Nowhere,’ he muttered. ‘Nowhere?’ she repeated after him. She was smiling. ‘I couldn’t have stood that party another second,’ he burst out, beating on the balustrade with his clenched fist. ‘I know, my love,’ she said. ‘It was a horrible bore, wasn’t it? If it hadn’t been given for me, I’d have left with you.’ Well, he obviously hadn’t expected anything like this. He looked bewildered at first. Then abject repentance spread over his face. She beckoned to him, ‘Come and say hello to Algernon, darling.’ He walked down the stairs a bit carefully, but when he reached her he seized both her hands in a very theatrical sort of way — and stood before her with his head bowed, asking to be forgiven, I suppose. She put her arms round him, and stroked the back of his neck. ‘I’ve been worried about you, darling,’ I heard her murmur, ‘and it isn’t good for me to be worried at a time like this, you know.’ I decided I’d better be off. I doubt if either of them heard me go.”

At this moment the servant came in to clear away our breakfast things, and we were silent until she had left.

“Well, where *had* he been all that time?” Algernon said. “Keeping a tryst with Christine? Or just innocently wandering the streets?”

"I've no idea." I got up, and stretched my arms. "I only hope this episode's taught Lise a lesson."

"Oh, now really, Paul, you can't blame this on her. I think she behaved with extreme generosity and good sense."

"Tactically, but not strategically," I said, and changed the subject.

CHAPTER XV

ON AUGUST THIRD, when all Britain was in a frenzied mood, few people could have noticed a brief paragraph announcing the postponement of Charley's new play, *A Trip to Eastbourne*. Mr. Charles Stranleigh, it stated, was "slightly indisposed." The few who did notice it may well have thought that the production would have had to be postponed in any case. This was no time for make-believe, except the make-believe that the war was going to be a short and glamour-touched interlude in the monotony of living. I was no less a victim of the prevailing fever than anyone else, and for that reason accepted the announcement at its face value. I merely made a mental note to ring up sometime and ask how Charley was.

Like most others, presumably, who have memories of that August third, I can recall after more than thirty years precisely how I spent it. I lunched with Algernon at his flat on the Chelsea Embankment. We could talk of only one topic. The work we had accomplished during the past two months was stripped of importance for us. Algernon had recently got engaged, and he wondered whether he should marry at once or wait until the war was over. He had already decided to join up. He hoped to be given a commission in his father's old regiment.

He came with me on the 49 bus as far as South Kensington where we both bought copies of the latest news edition. The sun was blazing down, and made the headlines dance before our eyes.

I was back in my rooms by four o'clock. I found a message asking me to telephone Miss Stael. I wondered what she could want. I hadn't set eyes on her since the *Hamlet* first night, and I was aware

that she no longer cared for my company. Gretchen, her Swiss maid, answered my ring. Miss Stael could not come to the telephone herself — she was resting — but she wished to see me urgently and would be most grateful if I would call on her as soon as convenient. Now I knew what the postponement of *A Trip to Eastbourne* must really signify. I had received a cry for help.

As the front door of her house closed behind me, I had the impression of entering an airtight compartment. Suddenly, I was cut off from the one thought that occupied other men's minds and up to now had occupied my own. I had come upon a private question that — uniquely, I felt — was not submerged by the public question of this day.

I was shown up to her bedroom. She lay, propped up on pillows, in a large canopied bed. She was wearing a pink satin jacket with full sleeves, and a lace boudoir cap with ribbons to match the jacket. She looked pale, but her eyes were clear. As I came in, she lowered the book she was reading and held out her hand.

"It's good of you to come, Paul."

"I'm sorry to find you like this."

"Oh, I'm just feeling rather tired."

She forced a smile. "Sit down, why don't you?" she said, indicating a chair by the wide-open window on the other side of the bed.

"We're going to talk about Charley. I imagine you know that quite well."

"I do."

"If you say 'I told you so' I shall behave like a woman and get angry. Quite unreasonably, of course. But, after all, I've capitulated by sending you this SOS."

"Oh, for Heaven's sake, Lise, we don't have to think of each other as antagonists! Just tell me how I can help you, and I'll do my best."

"Thank you, my dear. You're very generous."

She turned her head from me. At last she spoke in a hurried, staccato way that did not sound natural. It was as though she had

been gathering her strength to brazen things out. "Charley's been unfaithful to me. No doubt you've heard rumors."

"No," I said, though I remembered the story that Algernon had recounted a month ago. "Are you certain you're not misjudging him?"

"Oh quite. But it doesn't matter. I don't feel wronged, and I'd loathe to be pitied. To demand fidelity when the conditions for fidelity happen not to exist is ridiculous."

"I'm afraid I don't follow you."

"Well, to put it bluntly, my dear, I'm as useless a mistress for the time being as Renee was. If our positions were reversed, I should almost certainly be unfaithful to him. This affair of his is of absolutely no intrinsic importance. I only mention it because it explains what's happened since."

"How?"

"Charley's not so broad-minded as I am, unfortunately. He's horrified by his behavior — as horrified as you are, apparently."

"Anyone would be horrified."

"Yes — anyone who believes in the sentimentalities of third-rate romantic fiction. I don't. I don't demand fidelity as my right because I'm an expectant mother."

She glanced at me, her chin thrust forward. I had no doubt that she was shielding her pride behind a tissue of nonsense, but I held my peace.

"If only we'd discussed the thing openly! But he was obviously too ashamed to confess it, and I didn't ask him about it — well, because, as I've said, I attached no importance to it. I realize now that I made a bad mistake. I ought to have given him an opportunity to pour out his heart and I ought to have poured out forgiveness in return. You see, I'd forgotten poor Charley's abnormal susceptibility to guilt pangs."

She touched her forehead. "It's a vicious circle; remorse — intoxication. Intoxication — remorse. And he's had difficulty concentrating on his part in this new play. Inevitably, of course. Anyhow, he came back after a dress rehearsal the night before last drunk enough to

want to pick a quarrel. I'm not an easy person to quarrel with, but this time I gave in. I said some extremely foolish things. It ended in his leaving the house."

"I see. Well, Lise . . ."

"I'm not making a tragedy out of it, please understand. I know quite well he'll come back to me, and ordinarily I'd be perfectly happy for him to take his time. But there's the play. Frankly, he can't afford to give it up. We have to live, you know."

"He didn't go to rehearsal next day?"

"No." She was getting a little breathless. "They've postponed the production, and now they're threatening to get someone in his place."

I thought this talk of engaging a substitute was an idle threat at the present time. But I couldn't tell her why without mentioning the war situation, and I didn't like to do that, considering she was German born. Besides, I didn't believe she was concerned about Charley's disappearance only because he was in danger of losing a job.

"I have to get hold of him, Paul!" For the first time her expression betrayed some agitation, and she put her hands to her face as if to suppress the weakness or hide it from me.

"Do you know who this woman is?" I said.

"He's not with her."

"But do you know who she is?"

"No, I don't." I felt certain this was a lie.

She let her hands fall back by her sides. Her agitation was gone, but a kind of intense weariness had taken its place.

"I tell you, it was just a casual affair. Anyhow he wouldn't have gone to her that night. At least he wouldn't have stayed with her. I'm sure of that."

"Where do you *think* he is?"

"That's what I hoped you'd help me find out. You remember when he vanished after the first night of your play?"

"I most certainly do. I had to chase after him all the way to Manchester."

"Those people he went to —"

"The Sandersons?"

"I'd forgotten their name. Why did he go there?"

"I've never been able to understand."

"Well, impulses of that kind have a habit of repeating themselves. Don't you think it most likely that he's gone there again?"

I thought for a moment, remembering the solemn promise he had made. I could not believe him capable of breaking it, however drunken or distraught he might be.

"No, I'm afraid I don't."

A look of acute anguish passed over her face. Then her expression hardened, and, as I went on to explain my reasons, she appeared hardly to be listening. "Of course," I concluded, "I could find out definitely if you liked. If necessary, I could go to Manchester."

"Oh no, my dear. You've convinced me he isn't there. It was just an idea I had. All I can do now is hope he turns up of his own accord before it's too late."

I sat staring at the floor. I realized how much she must have pinned her hopes on the fancy that Charley was with the Sandersons. I felt that it was up to me to make an alternative suggestion, but I could think of none.

"Paul!" Her voice broke into my contemplation sharply. "Would you mind going now?"

The words brought me to my feet automatically.

"Lise, are you all right?" She was paler and her forehead was damp.

"Oh yes, quite all right. Just tired. And I think the heat — " The sentence trailed off. She raised her hand heavily, and I took it. It felt clammy.

"Wouldn't you like me to send for a doctor?"

She tried to smile reassurance. Suddenly her face was contorted in a spasm of pain. "Gretchen!" she gasped. "Tell Gretchen."

I met Gretchen at the foot of the staircase on her way up. Evidently Lise had summoned the strength to ring for her. I urged her to hurry.

A few minutes later, she came down again to telephone the doctor. She thought that the labor pains had begun prematurely.

I waited until the doctor arrived before I left. It was then nearly seven o'clock.

I had walked only a few steps when a taxi drove slowly past me in the opposite direction. A premonition made me stop and look back. The taxi halted where I knew it would. Charley got out.

He was wearing a light-colored suit and a straw hat at a jaunty angle. As I hailed him, he was watching the driver, a ruddy-faced man with a drooping mustache, haul a large suitcase from the back of the taxi.

"Paul, my dear old friend!" He put an arm round my shoulders and looked at me with swimming eyes. "Have you come to call on us?"

"No. I just happened to be passing this way."

"I'm delighted to see you anyhow. A most fortunate meeting. Come in," he added, trying to impel me forward. "We'll drink to victory."

"I'm sorry, Charley. I can't stop."

"Oh, but my dear fellow, you must." He released me. "I need your support." He put a hand to his mouth, and said in a stage whisper, "You see, I fancy I'm in disgrace. As a matter of fact, I was going to ask —" He pulled himself up, and turned to the taximan. "Paul, may I introduce Mr. — Mr. —"

"Featherstone's the name," the taximan blurted. He had put the suitcase on the ground, and stood with arms folded.

"Of course," Charley said. "A charming companion. He has one fault. He's a cricket enthusiast but prefers Middlesex to Lancashire. Won't listen to reason."

The taximan grinned sheepishly. Obviously, Charley was drunk, and I decided I must keep him away from the house until he was sober again.

"Look, Charley, let's go along to my place for a bit."

"Why, my dear fellow, when we're here?"

"Well, I'd rather."

He peered at me. "Ah, I understand. You want to talk to me privately. I suppose you think you ought to warn me."

"That's it."

"You're a sly old thing, Paul." He gave a loud chuckle. "But I've always loved you."

"Hop in," I said, opening the door of the taxi.

He bent down to do so, and shouted, "Drive on, my dear Featherstone, drive on!" Then, as if suddenly ashamed, he paused and said confidentially, "Sir Herbert Tree, Paul. That's what Sir Herbert said to the cabbie once. 'Drive on, drive on.'"

"I know, Charley." I shut the door on him, and hurriedly instructed Featherstone to leave the suitcase at the house and say that Charley was with me. I got into the taxi myself. Charley was sprawled on the seat. His straw hat, with the back of the brim wedged against the cushion, stood on end. He glanced at me stupidly as I sat down beside him.

"Where are we going?" he mumbled.

"To my rooms for a drink."

"Ah, good. An admirable idea. Ordinarily I never drink. You know that, don't you?"

"Of course."

"But today's an exception. An exception, isn't it? A great exception. We must drink to victory, mustn't we? Everybody must drink to victory. Down with the Kaiser! None but the brave deserve the fair. That's profoundly true, isn't it, my dear old Paul?"

"Profoundly."

"I'm glad you agree. Very glad."

He patted my knee, and lapsed into a contented silence.

Suddenly he sat upright. "I have to go."

"No, you don't."

"I'm afraid I do, old fellow. I have a first night. Can't miss it."

He tried to get out.

"It's been postponed," I said, pulling him back.

"Really? Nobody told me. Who postponed it? Did you?"

"No, the Kaiser," I said wearily.

"Oh." It was a second or two before he grasped the meaning of this. Then he rebelled. "None of that now, Paul! We don't take any blinking orders from the Kaiser, do we?"

"Where to now, gov'nor?" Featherstone put his head in at the door. I told him.

"One moment!" Charley commanded. "Mr. Featherstone, would you obey the Kaiser?"

"I meant the King," I put in hurriedly, signaling to Featherstone to take no notice. He went off to crank the engine.

"The King?"

"Yes. The King has postponed your play because of the critical situation, for which the Kaiser's to blame."

"Ah, I see. Most sensible. I must bow, of course, to His Majesty's wishes. God bless him, Paul, God bless him." He half rose, and added in a thunderous voice, "God save the King!"

The taxi moving off with a jolt threw him forward and back. He lost his balance, and landed on the floor. He made a wry face. As he pulled himself up, he said with a sudden flash of clarity, "Between you and me and the gatepost, I ought to be grateful to the Kaiser. Because I can't remember a bloody line of my part."

"I understood you were ill."

"Nonsense!" He slapped his chest. "My dear fellow, I've never felt better in my life."

"Evidently the newspapers must have been misinformed," I remarked drily.

"The newspapers?" He looked puzzled, then a dim understanding seemed to seep into his mind. "Ah well — as a matter of fact I have been rather seedy. Just a chill, really. Yes, a summer cold." He started to talk with a slightly hoarse voice. "I suppose darling Lise must have informed the press. It was her idea, you know!"

"What?"

"Her idea. She wanted to get rid of me. Called me a bloody rustic." A defiant expression crossed his face. "I took the hint. Needed to get out of town for a bit any road."

"You've been in the country, then?"

"In the country."

I glanced at the meter which now registered over two pounds.

"You didn't drive back in this by any chance? You seem to have had an extraordinarily long ride."

"Drive back from where, my dear?"

"From the country. Or wherever you've been hiding."

He laughed uproariously. "All the way from Blackpool! How could I have done?"

"Is that where you've been — in Blackpool?" I'd have sounded more astonished if I'd believed him.

"Of course. No air like the air of good old Blackpool, Paul. Made me as fit as a fiddle."

The taxi pulled up at our destination. I got out first. He followed, lurching a little.

"'Fraid I can't change that, sir," Featherstone said as Charley handed him a five-pound note.

"My pleasure," Charley said, turning away.

But then he remembered something. "The suitcase," he said. "Must get my suitcase."

"We left it behind," Featherstone told him.

"Left it behind?" he cried. "Where?"

"At the 'ouse, sir."

"Why did you leave it behind?" He spoke as though he had been shamefully betrayed.

"It's all right, Charley," I said. "I told Featherstone to leave it."

"You did, Paul? Don't you understand I've got everything I value in the world in that suitcase? Everything I value in the world."

"It's perfectly safe."

"We must go back for it at once!" he shouted, and made as if to get into the taxi again.

I grabbed his arm. "Listen, Charley. Your suitcase is perfectly safe. You'll find it when you get home. Stop fussing."

For several seconds he stood staring about him, wild-eyed. Then, without warning, he broke away and started running down the road after another taxi, gesticulating frantically for the driver to stop. He jumped in while the taxi was still moving.

Featherstone turned to me. "Shall we follow, sir?" he asked, with a backward jerk of his thumb.

"No," I said after a moment's hesitation. "Better leave it."

"Think 'e's going to cop it?"

"What?" I was surprised, and must have looked disapproving.

"Don't mean no offense, sir. But 'e was scared to go 'ome, if you ask me. That's why he went and got blotto."

"Where did you meet him?"

"Where did I pick him up, sir? Euston Station, sir."

I raised my eyebrows. If this was true, then he might, indeed, have been to Blackpool. Or he might, contrary to what I had assured Lise, have been to see the Sandersons. Euston was the terminal for Manchester and stations north.

"But we've been all over the blinkin' shop since then," Featherstone added, as he bent down to release the brake.

I watched him drive away. Then, with a shrug, I turned and went into my rooms. I felt suddenly worn out; too exhausted to think any more about Charley's problems — or the world's.

"Hello," Charley said, when I called the house shortly after nine o'clock next morning.

I wasn't prepared to hear his voice. I had expected Gretchen to answer.

"Oh, hello, Charley. This is Paul."

"Yes, Paul?" He sounded painfully sober, deadened.

"Well, I really rang up to inquire after Lise. You see . . ."

"Yes, I know. Gretchen told me you were here when —" He paused, then added hardly above a whisper, "It was very good of you to have come, Paul."

"That was nothing. How is Lise?"

"She's all right now, thank God. It was a very close shave, and the baby —" There was a quick intake of breath before he continued, "The baby couldn't be saved."

I felt a tightening in my throat, and several seconds passed before I dared speak. "Charley, I'm most dreadfully sorry."

"You shouldn't be sorry for me, Paul."

"I'm sorry for both of you. Deeply sorry. Please give Lise . . ."

"I will. She's been very brave."

There was a long silence.

"Look, Paul my dear," he said at last with a briskness that was perhaps intended to banish the memory of how near he had been to tears, "I have to go to the theater now. I must make my peace with poor old Latour. Would I be an awful nuisance if I dropped in on you for a minute or two on my way?"

"Of course not, Charley. I wish you would."

"I will, then." He added peremptorily, "I don't want any sympathy, please."

He turned up half an hour later. I hadn't finished dressing. The door between the bedroom and the sitting room was wide open, and shirts, collars, ties and shoes seemed to be strewn everywhere.

"Forgive this appalling mess," I said.

"My dear Paul, you forget that in the dim and distant past I was a bachelor myself." He smiled sadly, and sat down on the sofa. He put his hands behind his head, and stretched out his legs. He was pale, and his eyes were red with deep circles of exhaustion under them. He had a bruise high on his forehead that I had not noticed yesterday.

"I tripped up on the doorstep and fell flat on my face," he said answering my unspoken question. "A new and extremely undignified version of the prodigal's return."

"Oh. Is there anything I can get you?" I said. "A glass of sherry?"

He shook his head. "I mustn't dawdle. I've a lot of damage to try and repair. But I wanted to apologize to you first for my behavior last evening."

"Oh, that's forgotten." I had to keep moving to cover my embarrassment. I picked up a pair of walking shoes from the floor, and carried them into the bedroom.

"I wonder if you'd mind telling me," he resumed as I strolled back, "what Lise said when you saw her."

I gave him a surprised glance.

"Of course, I wouldn't blame you if you refused. You can tell me to go to hell if you like." There was a faintly comic edge to the way he said this. He "painted" the word "hell" in actor's fashion by sinking his voice.

"Well," I began cautiously, walking around the room as I spoke. I didn't repeat my conversation with Lise word for word. I emphasized that Lise didn't blame him either for his infidelity or for the quarrel which had resulted in his disappearance. I finished with a hollow assurance that they could still be happy together and have another child.

"Do you honestly think that?" It was a direct question, and it made me repent my trite hypocrisy.

"Well, I'm sure you'll find Lise's willing to let bygones be bygones," I said evasively.

"She hasn't allowed me near her, you know."

"You must give her time. After all —"

"Yes, of course. Anyhow I shall do my utmost to make amends. I've taken a vow of abstinence."

He picked up his hat, and walked to the door. "Don't you believe I'll be able to keep it?"

"I see no reason why you shouldn't," I lied.

CHAPTER XVI

TWO WEEKS later, after the cry of "Business As Usual" had been raised, *A Trip to Eastbourne* opened with Charles Stranleigh in the leading part. Its huge success was symptomatic of the wartime deterioration in critical standards and public taste. The word spread that it made one laugh painlessly, and that was enough to insure its popularity with new and mammoth audiences who poured into London and for whom the theater was on the same level as a comic sideshow.

I saw the third or fourth performance, and at the end I went round to call on Charley. His dressing room was crowded, and it was hard for me to believe, as he stood firmly among his admirers, accepting their extravagant compliments so unabashedly, that he had ever tasted shame. "Yes, it is a lovely play, isn't it?" "I'm profoundly flattered to hear you say that, my dear fellow." "You really think it will run forever, sweetheart?" "God bless you, darling, and a million thanks for coming round." He was a master of this rigmarole which concealed his thoughts and sometimes made one wonder whether he had any thoughts to conceal.

"Well, Paul," he said, when the last of his other visitors had departed. "What's your *candid* opinion of our little masterpiece?"

"Oh, it's amusing enough," I said without even pretended enthusiasm.

"Very light fare, of course. But it's what people need at the moment. Don't you agree?" He stood back from the mirror to admire himself. "Sobriety's a remarkably rapid cure. I look a new man already."

"You do, Charley," I said truthfully. "And I hope for your sake this play doesn't run indefinitely. I'd like to see you have another shot at Shakespeare — or something you can get your teeth into at any rate."

"Ah, but it's money I'm after at the moment, my dear, not glory. Keeping myself and two wives is an expensive business."

"I imagine it is. How is Lise, by the way?"

"She hasn't wanted to see anyone, Paul. But she is really much better now, and I hope she'll be able to leave for the country next week. A thorough rest and change of air ought to put her right, the doctor thinks."

"Is there peace between you?"

He swung the tassel of the heavy silk dressing gown he was wearing. "A truce, one might say. Good intentions, she suggests, aren't enough. She wants Renee's head and I gather that until I produce it, our relationship will remain polite, but platonic."

"Charley," I said, obeying an impulse, "do you really love Lise?"

"I love her very deeply," he said, lowering his eyes.

This was acting of the most transparent kind, a line spoken by a player who had himself despaired of making it sound convincing. He must have guessed my thoughts, for he threw up his hands in a gesture of surrender. "Anyhow I'll never leave her — unless she throws me out."

"You're going to find it hard to keep your vow of abstinence under these circumstances, aren't you?"

"I've kept it up to now."

"Oh, I don't doubt that."

"This time I mean it. I'm determined to make up to Lise for the way I've treated her. You know, she's really more dependent on me now than she ever was before. After all, she hasn't a career of her own any longer. And I doubt whether many of her friends will stand by her. You understand why?"

I did. Lise was still a German, even though she had lived in England for several years and was seeking naturalization. With a fever of hate sweeping the country, there was little inclination to dif-

ferentiate between "good" and "bad" Germans. Lise would almost certainly be forced into professional retirement. The members of her circle, admittedly, were immune to mass hysteria. Even so, they could not afford to ignore public opinion in a matter of this kind, and few of them would likely have the courage of their convictions. Under these circumstances, Lise had a strong motive for hanging on to Charley, whatever her revulsion of feelings against him might be. Evidently she had begun playing on his penitence.

"Does she realize herself what she's up against?" I asked innocently.

"Yes, Paul. I rather think she does."

I rather thought so, too.

The war claimed me at the beginning of October. I was commissioned a lieutenant in the Artists' Rifles, and after a period of intensive training was shipped off to the front. By then Charley and Lise had moved to the country. They had found a place for rent near Seaford within easy enough reach of London by car, though Charley expected to take a tiny flat in town for his own occasional use.

I had one letter from him while I was in France.

MY DEAR OLD PAUL,

YOU must know how much I admire you for the sacrifice you're making for your King and your country. It's just what I should have expected from you. You were never the kind to flinch from answering the call of honor. Considering what a miserable shirker I am, I feel ashamed to write to you, and if you throw this letter away unread I'll only say "More power to you!"

It may surprise you to hear that I'm still a sober citizen. But that's the best claim I can make for myself. Otherwise I continue to live in excessive comfort on my weekly winnings from *A Trip to Eastbourne* (which still shows no signs of ending, by the way). My "war work" consists of charity appearances:

declaiming patriotic verses for the inspiration of wealthy ladies and infirm old gentlemen.

My thoughts are with you all the time, dear Paul. Lise, too, sends love and prayers for your safety. *You* understand, I'm sure, that she's heart and soul for the Allied cause.

Always your devoted friend,

CHARLEY

P.S. Do you know, in a way I envy you.

A week or so after I received this letter, I was wounded in the leg and at the end of May, 1915, I was sent back to England, a hospital case. My injury was not serious; it healed within a few months. But it left me with a permanent limp, and I was unfit for active service.

After my discharge from hospital I was seconded, with the temporary rank of captain, to an organization in London responsible for home security, or, to be more exact, counterespionage. The work was highly secret. If I were asked directly what I was doing, I was to say that I was attached to the "Tactical Control Division" at the War Office. Whoever invented this answer must have imagined that it would silence the most inquisitive questioner. In my experience, however, it had the reverse effect. It aroused curiosity, and I soon could not give it without looking guilty or mysterious.

My qualifications for this work were, I gathered, that I had a literary bent and spoke German fluently. Neither accomplishment, as it happened, proved necessary. My days were tediously spent sitting at a desk, reading through reports in illiterate English and deciding whether these should be marked "Discard," "Bring forward," or "Refer to source for additional information." Except for my uniform, I might just as well have been a clerk. I kept regular office hours: 9 to 6, with an hour and a half off at midday for lunch. My evenings were free, and my week ends from Saturday noon onwards were also my own.

As soon as I had grown used to so much leisure, I set about looking up old friends who might still be in London. One of them, of

course, was Charley. He expressed amazement to hear that I had been wounded and delight that I was back in town.

A couple of days later we had lunch together at the Garrick Club. He made me describe my war experiences to him in the most graphic detail. His interest in the tedium and brutality of trench warfare appeared so keen that I suspected there was something morbid about it.

After lunch, he said he would stroll with me as far as Trafalgar Square. He thought I was going back to the War Office. Of course I didn't work in the War Office, but I couldn't admit to him that I didn't, and so to the War Office I had to pretend to go. As we came to St. Martin's-in-the-Fields, a streaky pale-faced woman deliberately blocked our path. She stared at Charley, as though trying to make up her mind whether she recognized him. Then she handed him a white feather with mock deference.

"The nerve of him!" she said in a high-pitched voice. "Showing his face with an officer!" She stiffened, snorted and swept on.

Charley put the feather carefully in his pocket.

"I shall add that to my collection," he murmured.

"Oh, you shouldn't take any notice of these hysterical females," I said. "All they go by is the uniform. They're quite likely to hand a crippled veteran a white feather — if he's wearing civilian clothes. Whereas — well, look at me. All I am now is a Whitehall warrior. There are hundreds doing the same sort of thing as I am who've never been within miles of a front line — and never will."

He squeezed my arm affectionately. "But in my case, Paul, she happened to pick on a winner."

Towards the end of September I went to spend a week end with Lise and him in the country. He had asked me with diffidence, and when I accepted was clearly both relieved and grateful.

"My dear fellow, I'm so glad. Lise will be tremendously bucked when I tell her. The poor dear's been having rather a bad time of it. Not one of her old friends has been near her for months."

I could understand this, even though it angered me. The flood

of "hate the Germans" hysteria was on the increase, and now the whole of England seemed to be in the grip of a spy mania as well. Anyone unfortunate enough to have a faintly Teutonic-sounding name was automatically suspect in the eyes of his neighbors and likely to be denounced on the flimsiest pretext. Daily, my desk at the office of Home Security was littered with fantastic reports from sources "believed to be entirely unreliable." This joke was rapidly disintegrating into a bore.

"You see, Paul," he said, after I had gone to pick him up at the end of his Saturday night performance, "Lise can't even show her face in Seaford without risking insults. She's been wonderfully courageous. Anyone else would have got embittered long before this. But Lise's just gone on quietly doing her bit."

He poured out a glass of barley water from the jug which his dresser had just brought him. "I haven't escaped myself. Latour's been deluged with letters demanding my banishment from the boards of his theater because of my 'association with a German woman.' Dear old Latour's naturally stood by me — bless him. I can't object to being called a coward, but I do object to being called unpatriotic. You must know what I feel about old England."

He drove me out to Seaford in his open, four-seater car. He was a curiously cautious driver. He kept his eyes painstakingly on the road and talked little. Just before we arrived, however, he glanced at me to say, "By the way, there's something I want to warn you about."

"Yes?"

"Be a good fellow, and don't mention the Army question in front of Lise."

"The Army question?"

"Don't let her think that I'm worried about not being in uniform. Just avoid the subject."

I had already guessed that Lise was still playing expertly on his penitence. In a sense this was a source of new strength for him. But it was plainly a source of new weakness also. For his conscience was

at her mercy. His conscience told him to join up, but he hadn't the heart to leave his German mistress.

A long, well-kept driveway led to the house which, as the flickering lamps approached it through the darkness, looked ludicrously immense for just the two of them.

"I hope we'll find some supper awaiting us," he said. "I don't know about you, my dear Paul, but personally I'm a bit peckish."

The house was heavily curtained in conformity with wartime regulations, but the lights were on inside. "Lise darling!" he called, as he led me through what approximated a baronial hall. The table in the dining room was laid for two, and there was cold food on the sideboard. "Lise!" he called through the open door, and then walked out. "I expect we'll find her in the music room."

We did — after what seemed to me a lengthy and confusing journey around corners and down steps.

She was sitting at the piano, her hands resting idly on the keyboard. A young man who looked to be in his mid-twenties was standing beside her, pointing at the music. He straightened as we came in. He was tall and thin, with a faintly aquiline nose, and a high forehead with fine blond hair brushed back from it.

Lise presented her cheek for Charley to kiss, and clasped my hand with Roman firmness. She was the same Lise, I thought: imperturbable, exquisitely tidy, wearing the clothes of a country lady with as much assurance as she had been wont to dress for London society — and still looking as strong and sturdy as any farm girl.

"Raoul appeared on our doorstep this afternoon, darling," she explained with a glance at the young man. "I've invited him to stop the week end."

"I hope you don't mind, Charley," Raoul said, stepping forward. He spoke with a thick accent which sounded Scandinavian.

"Delighted, my dear fellow," Charley said, with extreme lack of warmth. He ignored Raoul's outstretched hand. "Raoul Leander," he added, introducing me curtly.

"Look, darling," Lise said, "there's supper waiting for you in the dining room. Why don't you take Paul along, and we'll join you in a few minutes?"

Charley grunted acquiescence. "I wish she hadn't asked that chap," he said moodily as soon as we were out of earshot. "I'd hoped we'd have the week end to ourselves."

He waved me into the dining room. "There, Paul. Help yourself."

"But aren't you eating?"

"If you'll forgive me, old fellow, I feel too exhausted to bother about it. Lise will show you where your room is. Good night, my dear Paul. I'll see you in the morning." He closed the door after him. I realized he was sulking.

I had nearly finished my meal when Lise and Raoul appeared. I told Lise that Charley had gone to bed. She expressed no surprise.

The three of us sat talking for about an hour. Lise echoed something of Charley's effusiveness about my war record. "Oh, I can assure you it was very ordinary and also very brief," I said. "As you know I got pinked."

"Pinked!" She turned to Raoul. "There you have a perfect example of the Englishman's insistence on understatement. I really believe that if the whole country were overrun the newspapers would still call it just a setback. How can such a people ever be defeated?"

Raoul grinned self-consciously. I thought him a negative person. He spoke little except at Lise's prompting, but I supposed he felt ill at ease because of his foreignness. He had been in England only a short time, so Lise encouraged him to disclose, having arrived from Sweden a couple of months ago. He was a violinist by profession, but for the moment he was having to do a commercial job of some kind — rather a lowly one, I gathered.

The only time he showed the slightest animation was after Lise had asked me what work I was doing. My stock answer aroused the

same curiosity in him as it had in so many others. He wanted to know, inevitably, what was meant by "Tactical Control." I gave the absurdly offhand explanation which I had been instructed to use in such emergencies.

The conversation lagged and Lise's eyes began to wander. At last she got up. "Come," she said, stifling a yawn. "It's time I sent you both to bed."

At breakfast next morning, the atmosphere was uncomfortable. Charley appeared wearing heavy boots, a sweater and a pair of old flannel trousers. He muttered something about having been working in the garden, and then lapsed into silence. As soon as he had finished eating, he got up and made for the door.

"Where are you going, darling?" Lise asked pleasantly.

"I shall be in the garden if you want me."

"You're not being very polite to your guest, you know."

"Would you like to join me, Paul?" he said, as though the problem of my entertainment had not occurred to him before.

"Oh, I'm sure it wouldn't amuse Paul in the least to plant potatoes — or whatever you're doing. I tell you what. It's a lovely day — why don't you both take your lunch out?"

A look of reluctant pleasure came over his face. "Does that appeal to you, Paul?"

"Very much," I said. I glanced at my bad leg. "But I'm not too good at walking."

"Nonsense, my dear fellow!" He was now thoroughly enthusiastic. "We'll take the car and drive to the downs. You can manage a small climb, can't you, if we go easily?"

It was nearly midday before we got off. We squatted in a hollow where we were more or less undisturbed by the strong breeze from the sea. Charley opened the formidable picnic basket. "I wonder what they've given us," he said as he began removing paper packet after paper packet, as from a treasure chest. He spread them on the ground like Christmas presents, and we set to.

"Paul," he said when he could finally eat no more, "I'm afraid you

must have found me a rather grumpy week-end host. I'm sorry. But frankly I find that young man profoundly irritating."

"So I gathered. But why? He seems harmless enough to me."

"If you want the blunt truth, I'm jealous of him, Paul. I suspect he's Lise's lover."

"My dear Charley!"

"Oh, I admit I've no proof of it. And if I had I still shouldn't have any right to complain. You see, Lise and I came to an agreement. Until I'm in a position to marry her, we're free to lead our own separate lives."

"I see. Do you think you'll ever be able to marry her?"

"I fancy I'll be able to quite soon." He proceeded to tell me of the understanding he had at length reached with Renee and of how she had sailed for America last May.

"I suppose Lise's attitude is perfectly justified. But, you see, Paul, she still has enormous physical appeal for me. Of course, you may find that hard to believe, considering the appalling way I treated her. Unfortunately, it's true."

He threw away a piece of wood he had been brandishing. "It hasn't been easy — this monastic relationship. It was endurable as long as I felt I had her to myself. I was always rather jealous of her friends, you know. I couldn't get over the idea that she really thought more of them than she did of me, and with very few exceptions I disliked them, Paul. Between ourselves, I wasn't sorry when they dropped her."

We had wandered back to the car by this time, and he helped me to get in. "The chap's been in England only a couple of months, hasn't he?" I asked as he took the wheel.

"Is that all?" He spoke with mounting indignation. "Well, it seems much longer to me. When I found that I wasn't even to be spared his company for this week end, it was too much. After all, Lise knew you were coming. As a matter of fact, she asked me to ask you. It was to be a sort of reunion party for the three of us. Raoul's spoiled everything."

"Where did Lise meet this boy?"

"He's a violinist. She knew him before she came to England. He studied in Germany, I believe."

"Exactly. They're fellow musicians. She's probably about the only person he knows in England. It's natural he should want to see a lot of her — and she's been pretty starved for society herself. A hundred to one there is nothing more to it than that."

"Happen you're right, lad." He glanced at me quickly and smiled. "I'll try to conceal my feelings any road."

He was successful up to a point. Dinner certainly proved a less sullen occasion than breakfast had been, and there was some semblance of general conversation among the four of us. After we had adjourned to the music room for coffee, however, Lise and Raoul started to talk shop, and Charley walked out in a huff.

Lise made no comment. She strolled over to the piano and began strumming.

"Paul, my dear," she said. "Do be an angel and see if you can cheer Charley up. I expect you'll find him in the billiard room. It must be extraordinarily boring for him with nobody to play against. Unfortunately I dislike the game as much as I dislike any other — so I can't help."

I found him in the billiard room. He was trying a difficult shot.

"So you've tracked me down to my lair, Paul," he murmured as he took aim.

"Aren't I welcome?"

"Of course, you are, old fellow," he spoke up. "But I didn't suppose you shared my passion for this game."

"As a matter of fact, I used to be quite fond of it, though I'm dreadfully out of practice."

"Come on, then, let's play. You needn't be afraid of my prowess. I'm only a novice."

We had six or seven games, and he beat me in all of them by consistently wide margins. I had not expected him to be much good. I had never really adjusted myself to his natural aptitude for games.

"Charley, this is getting monotonous. Let's pack up and join the others."

"You run along, my dear. I'll stay here — and practice by myself a bit."

"I think Lise would like you to come."

"On the contrary. I'm sure she'd much prefer to be left alone with her young man."

"Really Charley! I thought you were going to forget these ridiculous suspicions of yours."

I had gone to the door. He was leaning against the billiard table. Now he stood upright, and thumped the end of his cue on the ground. "I can't stand that kind of mutually proprietary air they adopt towards each other. You'd think the house belonged to them — not to me at all."

"Charley!" I moved a step or two towards him. "I simply don't understand you. First, you consider it grossly unfair when Lise's more or less put into Coventry. But now that she's found someone who'll speak to her — someone with whom she has an interest in common — you get angry. Can't you see how absurd it is?"

He hesitated for a moment, then shrugged his shoulders and sauntered over to replace his cue on the rack. "You found the right word for me once, didn't you, Paul? Incurable. You know, I wasn't sure what it meant then. I had to look it up in the dictionary."

Raoul was no longer with Lise, and she herself was doing something of which I should never have believed her capable. She was knitting a pair of khaki socks.

"Please, don't look so surprised, Paul. I can practice the feminine virtues, if I have to. This isn't my first pair, is it, darling?"

"I fancy Lise holds the record for the neighborhood," Charley answered gravely. "Where's Raoul?"

"He's gone to bed. He has to be up so early in the morning." She put her knitting aside, and stretched out a hand to Charley. A trifle hesitantly, he came and took it. "Darling," she said soothingly, "please don't be unkind to the poor young man. I know he's not particularly

brilliant, and in the old days it's most unlikely I should have bothered with him myself. But, you see, I've been taught a lesson since then. I've learned what loneliness is."

He bent down to kiss her hand, and this act, I felt, symbolized yet another rededication to his life of penitence. I marveled at how easily she seemed able to control him now.

"Is Raoul going back to London?" I asked.

"Yes," Lise told me. "He's catching the early train."

"I'll have to take it too, I'm afraid."

"Oh dear! I was hoping you'd be able to stay over tomorrow. Would the War Office be upset if you took a few more hours off? You could drive up with Charley in the afternoon."

"No, I must leave in the morning."

"Then come and spend another week end with us soon, my dear."

"That's right," Charley put in. He was still holding her hand. At this moment they might have been a picture-book example of the happily married couple.

"I'd love to," I said.

"Could you manage next week end?" Lise said with genuine eagerness.

"I don't see why not."

"Good. We'll expect you. Charley will drive you down again after the play. Or come earlier — if you can. There's an excellent afternoon train." She released her hand from Charley's grasp to turn out the table lamp by her side.

Neither she nor Charley appeared next morning to see Raoul and me off. We were driven to the station by an elderly man who I presumed was the gardener. I slept during most of the journey, and mercifully Raoul did not attempt to keep me awake with bright conversation. Before we parted we exchanged addresses and he asked me when I'd be free to meet him for luncheon or dinner. I hedged and said I'd let him know. He said he'd get in touch with me during the course of the week.

On the following Wednesday morning, I was sent for by the head of my outfit. This caused me considerable surprise, for the Director of the Home Security organization was an almost mythical figure, so far as I and the majority of the junior officers were concerned.

His office was in a lofty part of the building, where his subordinates were not permitted to trespass, and allegedly he entered the building by a secret side door to which he alone held the key. The only evidence of his existence that most of us had was an occasional "memorandum to all officers" from D.H.S. himself. D.H.S. was his official nomenclature, intended to conceal his real identity even from those who worked under him. He was commonly and facetiously referred to as Jupiter.

What Jupiter could want with me I had no idea. I supposed that I must have been guilty of some major offense. It was not his policy to interview any of his officers merely to pass the time of day.

I was kept waiting in the outer office nearly half an hour before a green light above the door to his sanctum suddenly shone, and one of the secretaries told me curtly that I might go in now.

Jupiter's large polished mahogany desk was impressive enough, but Jupiter himself was disappointing. He was a short, ruddy-faced man of about fifty. Wearing mufti, he looked like the chairman of an insurance company. He had gray, thinning hair, carefully brushed to mask his baldness.

He remained silent until I was seated in the upright, leather-upholstered chair before his desk. He was smiling, and I found this disconcerting, for it was not an ordinary smile of greeting. Either it betokened embarrassment — or genuine amusement.

"How are you?" he said at last, as though I were someone he had often met but had not seen for some while.

"Oh, fine," I murmured.

"Everything all right?"

"I think so."

"Good. Are you doing much in the theater nowadays?"

"Well, no —"

"I suppose we don't allow you enough time for it."

"Hardly." I gave a forced laugh, which fell flat.

He appeared to be calling on his memory for some obscure fact. He sat with head thrown back and eyebrows raised. Then he said, as though this were a charge to which I must plead guilty or not guilty, "Didn't you write a play once about the Regency period?"

"Yes, it was my first play."

"I think I saw it. That fellow what's-his-name was in it, wasn't he?"

"You mean Charles Stranleigh?"

"That's right. Pretty good actor, isn't he?"

"At his best there's no one to beat him, in my opinion."

"Really? What's he like off the stage?"

He went on to ply me with questions about Charley. He asked these with apparent casualness, but I had no doubt of his avid interest in my replies and I was mortified to think that Jupiter was merely stagestruck. Because he was my chief I had to answer him with less obvious reluctance than I should have anyone else, but even so I soon found myself regarding him as a man more wearisome than awesome.

"Wouldn't you say he's taking rather a risk with his popularity at the moment?" I had told him the story of Charley's rapid rise to fame.

"Because he's kept out of uniform?"

"Yes. And because he's living with some German woman."

"Lise Stael?"

"That's not just a malicious rumor, then?"

"No. But you see —" I proceeded to explain something of Charley's predicament.

"You wouldn't question his patriotism?"

"Good Heavens, no! On the contrary."

"Nor Miss Stael's?"

"She's lived in this country for a long time. So far as I'm aware she's always been extremely pro-British. The fact that she's tech-

nically still a German is just her misfortune under the circumstances."

"I see." He nodded, as though he found my answer thoroughly convincing. I had the impression that he had run dry of questions. When the next one came it sounded like a stopgap. "What sort of place have they got in Seaford?"

"Oh, very nice. Large country house. Garden of several acres."

"Are you going down there again?"

"I think so; this week end, as a matter of fact."

"So soon?"

"Yes. I — But . . ." Suddenly I was staring at him open-mouthed. I had told him nothing about Charley and Lise having a place in Seaford, nothing about my having stayed with them there.

"Sunday was a good day for a picnic, wasn't it?" He smiled the same kind of smile that he had worn when I came in. Now I knew it signified amusement.

"We've had Stranleigh under surveillance for weeks," he said.

I shivered mentally. The realization that the movements of a friend of mine, movements of my own as well, had been watched gave me a belief in the seriousness and efficiency of the organization's work that I had never quite had before.

He started walking about the room with short footsteps, studying the carpet as he did so.

"I'd bet my last farthing on Stranleigh's loyalty," I said.

"You'd be foolish to bet that much on anybody's loyalty. But I'm inclined to agree with you. At any rate we have nothing against him."

"Then why — ?"

"You met a man called Raoul Leander at Stranleigh's house."

"Yes."

"Ask you about your work?"

"Well — yes."

"Seem curious?"

"He did rather."

"Suggest meeting you again?"

"Yes. Yes, he did."

"Raoul Leander is a German agent." He looked straight at me.

"He didn't find out anything," I said.

"Oh, naturally not. But I expected to hear he'd made an approach of some kind. Characteristically crude. The poor chap never had a chance. No training worth mentioning. We knew all about him before he got off the boat. Just shows how stupid the Huns are — or what damned little regard they have for human life. The most they could have hoped for from Leander was the lowest type of intelligence. Newspaper stuff."

"Is that his real name?"

"Yes. Swedish father. German mother. Brought up in Germany."

"He claims to be a violinist."

"That's true as well. He's the wrong type for the spy game. Too nervous. The tragic thing is he's not even in it for money, as far as we can make out. Anyhow — that's enough about him. It's the woman you can probably help me with."

"The woman?"

"Yes. This futile mission is not only going to cost the Huns Leander's neck. It's probably going to cost them Miss Stael's as well."

I felt my mouth go dry. I moved my hands stiffly along the arms of the chair.

"Perhaps you'd better read this." He picked up the only document that dimmed the polished expanse of his desk, and handed it to me. Then he sat down and gazed out of the window while he waited for me to study the facts.

It was like trying to read something when one has a high fever. The typewritten words would not stay still for me. Eventually what I gathered was this: For a considerable period before the war an agent, whose cover name was "Orpheus," had furnished reports to a barber in the East End of London. The barber had conducted a collecting and transmitting center for German Intelligence. Of the

twelve sub-agents serving this center Orpheus was the only one who had not already been identified by the time the war broke out and the only one, therefore, who could not be rounded up then. The reason was presumed to be that in the case of Orpheus a "Cut-out" or go-between had been employed. There had been direct contact between the barber and the other eleven agents, but there had been none, so far as was known, between Orpheus and him. The only evidence of Orpheus's existence was the references to the name as a source of information in the barber's communications to Germany. These had been regularly intercepted and examined before release.

From the outbreak of war until the arrival of Raoul Leander two months ago no more had been heard of Orpheus. Leander came from Stockholm ostensibly to take up employment with the London branch of a Swedish manufacturing firm. He was known to French counterespionage in Stockholm as a minor German agent, and the French had dispatched a warning about him to the British Home Security organization. Arrangements were made to keep him under the closest surveillance in England: to watch his movements, to search his luggage surreptitiously, to tap his telephone calls and to intercept his correspondence. Among his personal effects was an old newspaper photograph of Lise Stael, with the address of her house in St. John's Wood scribbled at the foot of it. One of the first things Leander did, after reaching London, was to try to make contact with her. He wrote her a letter. This was forwarded to Seaford after it had been clandestinely examined. It appeared harmless except for one sentence: "I have many pleasing messages for you from our mutual friend Orpheus."

A few days later, Leander received a cryptic note through the mail. The envelope was postmarked "Brighton." It said: "Orpheus will lunch next Wednesday at Gourmet Restaurant, Lisle Street. You should greet old friends."

Leander reached the restaurant early, and sat at a table by himself. He appeared nervous and restless, ate little, and kept looking

about him. Finally he went over to a table where a man and woman were seated. He spoke to the woman. For an instant she looked at him blankly, but then she beamed recognition, and introduced him to her companion, who got up to shake his hand. A waiter brought an extra chair to the table, and Leander sat down. He was with Charles Stranleigh and Lise Stael.

At that moment another person who had lunched by himself realized that his mission was complete. He could report that contact had been made between Leander and Orpheus. Moreover, he could provide the Home Security office with information that would at last establish the identity of Orpheus. Beyond doubt Orpheus was Lise Stael.

That was as far as the official report carried the story. I replaced the document gingerly on Jupiter's desk.

"When did you first meet Miss Stael, Hunter?"

"About three years ago."

"Begin at the beginning, and tell me anything you know about her which you think may be relevant."

I proceeded to do this, and, as I talked, it surprised me how little I knew about Lise considering that we had seen so much of each other at one period. Yet on the assumption that she was a successful woman who, for love of power or love of her country or love of intrigue or possibly for all three reasons, had consented to engage in espionage and accept the discipline which was entailed, the apparent contradictions in her behavior that once had puzzled me were now perfectly understandable.

How did Charley fit into the picture? Clearly she had wanted him as a lover to gratify her womanly vanity and desires. I could not believe that she had ever entertained the hope that she would be able to turn him into a traitor. It seemed likely, supposing she had foreseen the proximity of war and intended to continue her espionage work in England, that she had wanted him as a husband simply because she would thereby attain his name and nationality and thus be put in a stronger position to serve Germany.

"She always gave me the impression of being an extremely secretive person," I concluded. "She was an enigma. I told her sometimes that I wouldn't be surprised by anything she did."

D.H.S. suppressed a yawn. "Very well. I may want to talk to you again later."

There were many questions I wanted to ask him; but he had dismissed me.

"By the way, Hunter," he said as I got to the door, "keep clear of these friends of yours from now on. There's always the chance of Leander or Miss Stael tumbling to the fact that they're under suspicion before we're ready to tell Scotland Yard to go ahead and arrest them. That might mean we'd have to look for a leak, and it would be awkward if you'd been seeing them. You understand?"

"Yes, of course. What about Stranleigh, though? Should I avoid him, too?"

He nodded slowly. "I would if I were you. He's still living with Miss Stael, after all, and pretty well under her thumb — so you say. Besides, though we've turned up nothing against him yet, he's not out of the woods, you know."

"Oh, I see." I felt painfully jolted again. "When *will* he be cleared, do you think?" The question was absurd, as I realized the moment I asked it.

"When his lady friend stands in the dock *without* him," he said. "Or rather, *if* she does."

CHAPTER XVII

I SENT Charley a note saying I regretted I was going to be kept on duty next week end. He rang me up to ask if I couldn't possibly get away, as Lise would be so disappointed. Then he tried to pin me down to another date. My excuses must have sounded unconvincing. A few days later, I received a cutting and laconic post card from him. It contained just the three words: *Et tu, Brute.*

An answer would have led only to further embarrassment; and thereafter I had no difficulty in keeping out of his way. I avoided going to the Garrick Club or anywhere else I might run into him. I could not put him out of my mind, however. I suffered from a heavy sense of betraying an old friend. I believed he was innocent of the slightest suspicion of Lise's treachery, and I hated the idea of his learning about it through the brutal process of law.

For weeks after my interview with D.H.S. I lived in an agony of suspense. He did not send for me again. Working every day in the Home Security organization, and yet being as little informed as any outsider concerning the progress of what I regarded as its most important investigation, was like sitting in a theater behind a pillar that completely blocks one's view of the stage.

On October 25 I read in my morning newspaper that one Raoul Leander, a Swedish "businessman," had been arrested by officers of the Scotland Yard Special Branch on suspicion of being an agent of an enemy power.

I did not learn the inside story until after the case was closed, when a detailed post-mortem report was circulated for the information of all officers in the Home Security organization.

Leander had proved an easy prey for the trained interrogators at Scotland Yard. He broke down, made a full confession, and inculcated Lise beyond question.

She was arrested a day later. The news, of course, attracted big headlines, but security regulations would not permit more than the bare fact of her arrest, on a charge of espionage, to be disclosed.

She was a far tougher nut to crack than Leander. Even when she was confronted with his confession, she remained outwardly unshaken. "Did he really sign this?" she asked calmly. Her interrogators assured her she would have confirmation of that in Court. They suggested she might like to make a statement of her own. "Why should I?" she said. "You have all the evidence you need, haven't you?"

As a matter of fact, they hadn't. One, and one only, of Leander's reports would have been of definite use to the enemy if it had ever reached him. It concerned a military secret, and the information could only have been acquired from someone inside the War Office. Leander did not know who this someone was, because Lise had simply passed him the report and told him to transmit it to Germany through his illicit channel of communication. However, it followed that Lise herself must know the someone's identity, and although Home Security already had a strong suspicion as a result of having kept her under surveillance during the past weeks, there was insufficient evidence for action without her testimony.

She was asked to name the source of her secret military information. "Suppose I could tell you," she replied after reflection. "And suppose I were willing to — what then?"

Her interrogators said that mitigation of her sentence might be arranged if she would co-operate unreservedly. "I shall think it over," she said. That was as far as she would go for the time being. She was removed in custody to await the formal charge.

At this point, Charley knew that she had been arrested and nothing more. Though the news must have upset him, he may not have been particularly surprised by it, for it was common knowledge

that an enemy alien enjoyed a precarious freedom at best. An hour or so after Lise was taken to prison, he arrived at Scotland Yard. He had come by request, but voluntarily. There was still no evidence against him.

The interview proved a mere formality. A few questions were put to him, and he answered these in such a way that his questioners were finally convinced of his innocence. He was then told that Lise was being held incommunicado and would be charged with the crime of assisting the enemy. He was horrified and indignant. He repeated that nobody was more loyal to the Allied cause than she. He denounced the action taken against her. Unfortunately, the Scotland Yard officials could not, for reasons of security, give him the facts of the case. Moreover, they had to refuse him permission to visit Lise in prison.

He was on the verge of tears when he left them. Outside he was met by press photographers. He tried to cover his face, but his picture was published next morning on the front pages of nearly all the popular newspapers. Charles Stranleigh, the captions stated, had "allegedly" been interviewed by Scotland Yard in connection with the "sensational Lise Stael spy charge."

This unsavory publicity added quickly and explosively to his growing unpopularity. Some people may have regarded it as proof positive that he was a traitor. At any rate, when he appeared on the stage that evening, there was scattered booing. The few people who were responsible for this disturbance persisted, and somehow succeeded in rallying the majority to their cause. Probably most of the audience had no more than the haziest notion why they were booing, but lustfully enjoyed the opportunity to torment a successful and celebrated young man. Pandemonium broke out, and the curtain had to be lowered.

There was a pause of several minutes during which the audience joked and jostled, and then became relatively quiet. Charley stepped in front of the curtain. Again he was greeted with booing and hissing. In vain he held up his hands for silence. The noise grew louder,

more brutally determined. He lowered his hands, and then, trained actor that he was, stood still, patiently facing his audience, awaiting their pleasure.

In the end, the bulk of the audience must have either felt shamed by his courage or become weary of participating in an inconclusive game of man-baiting. That was not, after all, what they had paid their money to do. Anyhow, an insistent demand was launched to "give him a chance" and peace was finally restored. Charley bowed his head as if in tired and grateful acknowledgment of the silence. Then he spoke. The words were characteristic of his florid style, but from all accounts he spoke them quietly and unaffectedly.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said. "I realize the immediate cause for this protest against my appearance on the stage tonight. I won't make an elaborate defense. But I should like to point out that England is proud of guaranteeing everyone, irrespective of nationality, in wartime as in peacetime, the right to a fair trial. No man or woman is guilty until found so in an impartial court of law. As it happens, I am not faced myself with a criminal charge. Even if I were, I should surely be innocent until proved guilty. Personally — and I want to make this very clear — I have complete faith in the innocence of someone against whom a charge has been made. I will say no more about that. For the rest I do not pretend to have an admirable record. I do not pretend to have served my country as I should. I make no claim on your indulgence. I merely appeal to you, if it is your wish, to let the play go on."

He withdrew. The performance was resumed, and continued to the end without interruption.

Either Charley could not bring himself to face a possible repetition of the ordeal, or else the management decided that, star actor though he was, he had become a dangerous liability for the present. The evening press next day reported that Charles Stranleigh had withdrawn from the cast of the perennial *A Trip to Eastbourne*. One paper printed an interview with him, in which he freely admitted that Lise Stael was a "very dear friend of his." He reiterated his faith

in her innocence, and said that he intended to arrange for her to be defended by "the finest legal brains in the country."

As a matter of fact, he made good his promise. He was himself responsible for persuading Sir Godfrey Fairburn to take the case, after Lise's solicitor had failed in this. He also appealed several times again for permission to visit Lise, though he was always refused. But none of this was reported in the newspapers, which were my only source of information about him at the time. Once he had been driven from the stage a curtain of silence descended on his movements and activities.

Towards the end of November, I read that the joint trial of Lise and Leander had been set for the seventeenth of next month, and was to be held *in camera*.

I then obtained a second interview with D.H.S., and asked him if some way could not be found after the trial was over of telling Charley the truth in confidence. He promised me that it would be, though he did not authorize me to speak to Charley myself. "Fairburn's defending Miss Stael, isn't he?" he said. "Well, we'll instruct him to show Stranleigh the light when the time comes. Give him a chance to earn his fee. He's not going to have a particularly strenuous time of it defending his client — if things go according to plan."

I had no idea what he meant by this, for I still knew nothing of the offer Lise had been made when she was first interrogated at Scotland Yard.

Actually, she waited until the last moment before accepting it. Sir Godfrey Fairburn came into Court still expecting to defend her according to her original instructions: a flat denial of guilt.

I think it would be unfair, even though so many years have passed, to divulge the name of the staff officer whom she eventually betrayed to save her own skin. He was given a chance to avoid facing a court-martial, and he took it. He blew his brains out.

The actual trial was a brief proceeding. Both defendants pleaded guilty, and both received the death sentence. A fortnight later, the

King, on the advice of the Home Secretary, commuted Lise's sentence to a term of eight years imprisonment. The grounds for this extraordinary clemency could not be disclosed, and it caused considerable resentment.

However, no particular sensation could long survive the great surge of current news. 1916 was not much above a month old before Lise Stael, now lodged in Aylesbury Jail, was a forgotten figure.

Her release for repatriation in 1920, when she had served less than five years of her sentence, was reported laconically but quite uncritically. So far as I am aware she never showed her face in England again.

As I emerged from my office at lunchtime on the day of the trial I heard the news vendors crying, "Lise Stael to Die!" "Woman Spy Convicted!"

I no longer had a reason for avoiding Charley, and though I did not relish the prospect of seeing him, I knew that my conscience would not rest until I had made at least a token gesture of getting in touch with him. I determined to telephone him at his flat that evening, though I thought that he would likely not be there.

I was living again in the bachelor's quarters in Clarges Street that I had occupied before the war. Mrs. Kemp, my landlady, came fluttering into view the moment I entered the front hall. She must have been anxiously listening for my approach.

"Mr. Hunter, there's a gentleman here to see you."

"Who is he?"

"I told him you weren't in. But he said he'd wait in your rooms until you got back. I hope it's all right."

"But who is he? Didn't you ask his name?"

"I think it's that Mr. Stranleigh, sir."

"Oh, thank you, Mrs. Kemp." I braced myself before I opened the door. Charley was standing in the center of the room. He had not taken off his overcoat, and he was holding his hat and walking stick in one hand. He faced me like an accusing ghost.

"Charley," I said after an instant's hesitation, "Mrs. Kemp told me you were here."

"You needn't be alarmed, Paul. I'm not staying." There was a hollowness about his voice that matched the pallor of his face.

"As a matter of fact, I was just about to telephone you," I said, trying to sound natural.

He ignored my remark.

"Well, take off your things and sit down — why don't you?" I busied myself disposing of my own hat and overcoat.

"Thank you, Paul — but no. I've only come to say good-by."

"You're going away?" I asked, fencing for time.

"Yes."

"Where to?"

"I don't know yet. It doesn't matter much, does it?"

"My dear Charley, don't talk nonsense."

"I don't mind a damn what the rest of them think," he said with sudden vehemence. "But *you* believe I'm a traitor, too, don't you, Paul? You believe I tried to shield that bloody —"

"No, of course, I don't."

"I swear to you," he went on, as though he had not heard me — "I swear I didn't know until a few hours ago what she was. I'd have staked my life on her innocence."

"Look, Charley, you don't have to convince me you're not implicated. I've never for a moment imagined you were."

His mouth opened and shut. A half-hurt, half-puzzled look came into his eyes. "Then why haven't I heard from you all this time? I needed your support."

"Well, I imagined you wouldn't want to see me. After that curt note you sent me —"

"Oh, yes, I was extremely offended with you even then, but after all that was before . . ." He stopped short as though recollecting something that destroyed his argument. "I'm sorry, old fellow. I'm a little confused. I can't get things straightened out in my mind. I see it now, of course. You realized what they were up to the moment

you saw them together. That's why you refused to spend another week end with us."

"Yes," I lied, glad to follow this avenue of escape.

He moved a step or two forward, and stood staring at the ground, his feet together, both hands on the walking stick. Then he turned to me and, as a child might question a conjurer, he asked, "Paul, what *made* you suspect them?"

"I suppose it was just instinct really," I said, sitting on the sofa.

"Why didn't you warn me?"

"For one thing I couldn't be sure. And for another I was afraid you wouldn't believe me."

"You must think me the biggest ass that's ever been born!" He stalked towards the door. "But you're right," he said, turning round sharply. "I wouldn't have believed you. And I still wouldn't believe you if she hadn't confessed. Confessed openly — without a qualm. Sir Godfrey Fairburn told me afterwards that she was proud of what she'd done against England. I made a fool of myself getting him to defend her. She wouldn't even allow him to ask for mercy. Well, she deserves none, does she, Paul?"

He had been walking about the room, gesticulating wildly. Now, with his overcoat still on, he sat down. "I suppose you've heard," he said in a quieter tone, "that they gave her the death sentence?"

"Yes."

"Do you think they'll carry it out?"

"It's hard to say. The fact that she's a woman may make some difference."

"I can't bear to think of it. I'm not being weak, mind you. You must realize that I have more reason than anyone else to hope that justice is done. I've nothing but loathing left for her — the bitch. But I still can't bear to think of — of —" He passed a hand over his eyes. Then he said, as a kind of despairing afterthought, "Perhaps that fellow Fairburn was lying?"

"What do you mean?"

"Happen she didn't plead guilty at all. Or she was forced into it."

He was warming to the idea. "Oh, he sounded convincing enough, did Sir Godfrey Fairburn. But that's his stock-in-trade — deceiving people. That's how he earns his living. They've all been against Lise from the start. Including you. Of course, Fairburn was in league with the prosecution. They cooked the whole thing up between them. I should have realized it." He jumped to his feet. "I must go to her at once!"

"Charley!" I snapped, raising my voice. "You're talking like a lunatic! Stop it!"

He was on his way to the door again, but my words brought him to a halt. His body seemed to crumple. He clutched his forehead.

"You know as well as I do that Fairburn couldn't conceivably have told you anything but the truth."

"Yes, of course," he muttered. "Forgive me, Paul. I really don't know what I'm saying. I've got to get away. Right away . . ."

He stared at me with eyes that showed now the appalling strain he had been under.

"No, Charley, what you need is to talk to someone. You've been bottling all this up for too long. Why not stay here for a bit? . . . And then if you feel up to it we might get some dinner later on. At the Garrick, I suggest. After all, you've got to face the world eventually. The sooner you take the plunge the better."

He sat down, though he still clung to his overcoat. He smiled ruefully: "You might tempt me with a drink," he said. "I could do with a rather strong drink."

I was reluctant to agree, but I didn't see what else I could do. I mixed him a stiff whisky and soda. He held the glass before him, and contemplated the rich amber liquid before taking a generous gulp. "That's one blessing, I suppose. I'm no longer deprived of this solace. I really have been a complete ass, haven't I, my dear Paul? Swearing off all the pleasures of life for the sake of that —" He took a second swallow of the drink. "Of course, you always thought so secretly, didn't you? You always knew I was making an idiot of myself. Imagine if she'd had my child! Imagine my position

if that had happened! But you saw through her, didn't you? You knew she was a bloody fake even before Scotland Yard got on to her." He paused, looking at me inquiringly. "Didn't you?"

"Well, I . . ."

"Why didn't you warn me, Paul? Why didn't you?" He put up his hand to stop my answering. "Ah yes, I know. You thought to yourself, 'Poor old Charley's such a B.F. he'll never see it.' And you were right. By Jingo, you were right! Charles Stranleigh — the world's biggest bloody fool. The man who was taken in by the world's biggest, bloodiest bitch."

He talked on and on, saying the same things over and over again, contradicting them as many times and using obscenities I had never heard from him before. An hour or so passed. By then I had no doubt that he was extremely drunk. I had refilled his glass several times, but I couldn't believe he had swallowed enough of my whisky to be reduced to such a besotted state. He must have consumed a great deal more before his arrival.

"Just a short one," he said, pointing to his empty glass.

"Are you sure you really want another?"

"My dear Paul — if you begrudge it to me — I most certainly do not!" He attempted to rise with dignity as well as alacrity, but spoiled the effect by stumbling backwards.

"Don't be an idiot, Charley," I said, taking his glass.

"No, I shouldn't dream of accepting another drink from you. I'm sorry I've trespassed on your hospitality at all. I should have known you wouldn't wish to be bothered with me." He started buttoning his overcoat.

"How about getting some dinner?"

"I don't want any dinner." He bent down awkwardly to pick up his stick. "This isn't a night for celebration."

"Come on," I said, taking his arm. "You must eat."

He shook his arm free. "If I have to celebrate, I prefer to celebrate on my own — or with people who understand me. Not with your sort of people, who all deserted me. They can think what they muck-

ing well like. I'm finished with them for good, and now I see you're one of them." He struck a very erect pose. "Good-by, Paul," he said with a low bow, before searching for the doorknob. "I shall not forget what a friend you've been to me in trouble." He walked out, and I heard the front door slam.

I telephoned him next morning, but I was not surprised when the servant told me he was out, and couldn't say where he was. He had staged another of his disappearances; only this time there was no wife or mistress or theater manager to be worried about finding him.

For more than a week I waited in vain for a clue to his whereabouts. Then at last I discovered the answer in the press. Charles Stranleigh, I read to my amazement, had enlisted as a private in a famous Lancashire regiment. He had turned up at a Manchester recruiting station to volunteer, and had served several days in the ranks before his identity was discovered.

What tickled his public's fancy in this story — and won their admiration — was not so much that he should finally have joined up but that he should have done so as a private. The Army had not yet been "democratized" by the conscription law, and it was recognized that in his position he could have had a commission more or less for the asking.

His own explanation reached me a few days later from an unidentified Army training camp somewhere in the north of England:

Well, my dear Paul, I observe that my numerical anonymity has been pierced — those blasted reporters are still after me. So I can't delay this any longer. I would have written you before, only (*a*) I was too ashamed — and you must be sick to death of my apologies — and (*b*), to be quite candid, I have so many aches and pains after so much unaccustomed exercise I find it physically something of an ordeal to put pen to paper.

But I do feel a better man already. And I don't think I'll have much to complain of so long as they keep me training in Blighty. It's not such a bad life — the private soldier's. In a way it's like being back in the old Dyestuffs Company again

— regular hours, regular pay — except that I gather the penalties for unpunctuality are more undignified and severe. They don't threaten to dismiss you from the Army! Anyway, it's refreshing to be free of responsibilities — and just do as one's told — after all the demands and complications of my life in the past few years. What an unholy mess I made of things, didn't I! If I'm wise I'll stay in the Army for keeps.

If you hear of any deep-laid plot to yank me out of the ranks — *please* squash it! Do your best to keep the press and the rest of the curiosity-seekers off my trail. I want to forget I was an actor — at least until the war's over.

Did you read that they've commuted Lise's sentence? I must admit that it's a great weight off my mind, although I should hate ever to have to lay eyes on her again. Paul — I only came to see you on that awful night because I had to convince you I hadn't consciously done anything to aid or abet her. I deeply regret overstaying my welcome. Knowing you, I'm sure I can count on your forgiveness.

And when you next think about your correspondence, please remember your very trying, long-suffered but most affectionate old friend,

CHARLEY

PART FOUR

Yvonne

CHAPTER XVIII

CHARLEY served more than three years in the Artillery. We corresponded intermittently. I thought he must secretly hate Army life, but he himself never complained about it. He had said in his very first letter that being in the Army was like being back with the Northern Dyestuffs Company and, as time went on, he gave an increasing impression of having reverted mentally to his Manchester days. For example, the half-amused, half-proud way in which he wrote of his award of two stripes and boasted that he was now a "full-blown corporal" was reminiscent of his manner long ago when he had confided to me that Hugo Redfern had secured him an offer of promotion. I assumed at the time he was merely putting a brave front on things. After the war, however — when it became fashionable to recount the experiences of famous men in the Army — the anecdotes about Charley all had to do with his extraordinary popularity in the ranks and with the unusually tender treatment he had received from comrades and superiors alike. So I realized then that there was, indeed, a fair analogy to be drawn between his life as a soldier and his life as a clerk.

At the beginning of 1918, I was sent by the Home Security organization on a special job to the Balkans, and there I remained for the better part of three years. I can relate what happened to Charley in the meanwhile only baldly, and most of it I did not find out until my return.

He never rose higher than a corporal. A few days before the Armistice he was wounded in action, and removed to a British military hospital near Rouen. There he met Yvonne Summers, who

was to be his second wife. She was one of the young volunteer nurses in his ward.

Six months later he was discharged from the Army, and two months after that he and Yvonne were married. Yvonne's parents lived in Knutsford and belonged to Manchester's aristocracy, to the class of wealthy merchants who made their homes outside the city. Mrs. Summers was a Frenchwoman of solid Huguenot stock. Her husband, the owner of a small and prosperous textile firm, had met her on a business trip to Lyons a quarter of century ago.

Yvonne was an only child, and both her mother and father had hoped that she would provide them with the kind of son-in-law they could make believe was their own son, the son they had always wanted. They did not think Charley fitted the bill.

Yvonne, however, was a determined young woman. Her parents had been unable to prevent her from going to France as a volunteer nurse at the age of nineteen. They were unable to prevent her from becoming the second Mrs. Stranleigh at the age of twenty-one. Her strength of mind, rather than Charley's gift of ingratiation, forced them to countenance the wedding.

Charley and Yvonne were married in Knutsford. They left immediately afterwards for a six weeks honeymoon in Portugal, and then returned to set up house in London.

On November 27, 1919, Charley resumed his stage career in *Much Ado About Nothing*, with Iris Fairfax as Beatrice to his Benedick. He received a tremendous ovation. Charles Stranleigh, the critics reported, was back where he belonged — in the theater — and playgoers would welcome the news as a further reassurance that once more England was free to cultivate the arts of peace.

Charley had written to me shortly before the wedding, though he had said nothing about the difficulties with Yvonne's parents and little about Yvonne herself, except that she was the one girl in the world for him. Ten months later he wrote again, this time to tell me that he and Yvonne were the parents of a baby boy. He asked me to be one of the godfathers. I was present by proxy when the child was

christened Gerald Cheswick: Gerald after Yvonne's father and Cheswick after Charley's mother.

On December 13, 1920, I finally got back to London, demobilization and a chance to do my own work again. It was now over four years since I had laid eyes on Charley, and I promised myself that I would get in touch with him on the day of my arrival. However, when I found that he was due to open two nights hence in a new production — an English version of the Greek tragedy *Oedipus* — I thought it would be fun, instead of telephoning him, to turn up at this unexpectedly. Hubert Langham, who was presenting the play, promised to find room for me somewhere if I came along.

That day I had lunch with Algernon Hart. We hadn't seen each other since the beginning of the war, and amidst a welter of reminiscence we inevitably started talking of Charley.

"Don't expect to see him alone," Algernon said rather bitterly.

"What do you mean?"

"That young wife of his. She's his jailor. Never lets him out of her sight."

"Don't you like her?"

"I'd describe her as an exceptionally pretty nonconformist, Paul. Her mission in life is to save souls — on a strictly profit-making basis. In short, she's pure Manchester."

"Well, she sounds like the sort of wife Charley's always needed. A nice, normal girl. Someone to organize him."

"Nice, normal girl!" Algernon said contemptuously. "My dear Paul, Charley's an artist, not a cotton business. If she ever really succeeds in organizing him, as you put it, she'll wreck his talent completely. She hasn't done that so far — thank God. In fact, I'm inclined to think he's a finer actor than he ever was."

A few hours later I had most exciting confirmation of this last statement. Charley's *Oedipus* was a master-performance, of the kind which makes one forever bemoan the fact that the actor's art is evanescent. The part tested his talents to the full. He had been carefully directed in the interpretation of it, but this interpretation

would have been beyond the powers of any actor lacking his incomparable range and volume of voice. The result was a personification of majestic tragedy, and its thunderous climax, to quote one critic, "overwhelmed the audience with an emotion for which no name exists — a combination of terror and stark pity."

Personally I was so moved that I needed time to recover, and I took a stroll before going behind. His dressing room was still loud with gush when I reached it, but there were by now more people coming out than trying to get in. It was a familiar scene. He was the actor responding to fulsome compliments in exactly the fashion I remembered, profligate with his endearments and embraces.

"Paul," he cried as soon as he caught sight of me. "Darling," he spoke to the girl standing beside him, "here's old Paul at last! Well, my dear fellow, how are you?" He leaned forward to wring my hand. "I was beginning to think you'd decided to give me a miss."

"You knew I was in front, then?"

"Yes. Hubert told me. Paul — this is Yvonne." He gave her a gentle hug as he introduced me.

She was not at all as I had pictured her. She had a slim, boyish figure, and, although she was on the tallish side, she was dwarfed by Charley. She looked so young, in fact, that I was immediately conscious of the signs of encroaching middle age that had crept into Charley's appearance. True, his hair was still thick and unflecked with gray, his face free of deep lines or furrows, but the boyishness had gone out of him. The face had become firmer, the body more solid.

Yvonne was pretty, but her face had no real beauty. Hers was a prettiness, one felt, upon which advancing years would not sit well. It could last only so long as her cheeks retained their fresh color, her eyes their brightness, her smile its spontaneity. It was a vivacious, unthinking prettiness.

"You're Paul Hunter, and you're a playwright, aren't you?" she said. She had an eager, rather high-pitched voice in which there lurked a note of flirtatiousness. "And before you became a play-

a dramatic critic in Manchester. And — would you
ough your whole life story?"

ve heard it so often. Besides, I naturally had to
tials of my son's godfather. He's a very particular

"except for one thing. He insists on knowing what
g abroad all this time? Won't you tell me?"

warming to her. I thought her an easy person to
ot because she seemed so genuinely interested in
to say. I imagined I was holding her rapt attention
ne broke off our conversation to deal with some
pestering Charley to bring her to supper with them.
to," she said, "but I'm afraid we'll have to make it
arley's dead tired. I've promised faithfully to take
e."

had one foot in the grave the way Gale treats me,"
ulgently, as he went to the door with the friends
had been rejected.

a face. "He doesn't want to go at all, but he can
always have to do it for him."

call you Gale?"

htingale. That was his nickname for me in the

most appropriate," I said teasingly.

r a celebration once in a while. But most people
that acting isn't a job at all. They don't realize
ork it is. Charley's been rehearsing day and night
Honestly, he's exhausted."

formance — I'm not a bit surprised. I thought it

leading lady, clad in evening dress, had looked in to say good night.

"Paul says — may I call you Paul?"

"You must."

"Paul says this is the best thing you've done."

He blew her a kiss. "Tell Paul I owe it all to you," he said.

"Isn't that typical of him? I don't know the first thing about acting yet. Well, when are you coming to see your godson?"

"Whenever you ask me."

"How about the day after tomorrow? Could you come about five?"

"I think so."

"And stay to dinner, won't you? We have to have it early, of course."

"I'd like that very much."

Charley approached, and she told him of the engagement we'd made. "That's gradely," he said. "I knew you two would hit it off. Don't you think my Gale's a charmer, Paul?"

"I do, indeed," I said. "I congratulate you."

"And didn't I tell you you'd fall in love with him at first sight?" he said to Yvonne. She smiled, and whispered something in his ear.

"Dear old Paul," he said. "It's wonderful to have you back with us again."

They were standing, each with an arm round the other's waist, as I took my leave.

Their house in South Kensington was solidly but gracelessly furnished, and I had the feeling that Yvonne must have set out to make it as near as possible a replica of her parents' house in Knutsford.

Similarly she seemed anxious that her child's infancy should be a reproduction of her own. She had engaged her old nanny to look after the baby, and the latter — a large, gray-haired woman of slow gait — was supreme ruler of the nursery domain on the top floor.

We spent nearly an hour up there, while the baby was bathed and dried and redraped and put away in its cot. Yvonne was permitted, under the nanny's anxious surveillance, to take the baby in her arms. Charley made some rather stately and tentative noises of cooing affection, while I did my utmost to put on an expression of sufficient tenderness to convince them that I was a godfather devoted to babies in general and to this baby in particular.

"Do you think he's more like Charley or me?" Yvonne said when we were downstairs again.

"Well, I'm not sure." I looked desperately from mother to father.

"I'll answer for you," Charley said. "You didn't detect the slightest resemblance to either of us."

He was sitting in a relaxed position, idly fiddling with his watch chain. Yvonne came behind his chair, and kissed the top of his head. "You shouldn't have let him off so easily, darling. I wanted to test his honesty."

She went to the mantelpiece, which was lined with invitation cards. Several had fallen askew, and she started replacing them. She seemed full of nervous energy, incapable of keeping still for more than a few moments at a time.

"I always wanted a son," she said, "but Charley hoped for a daughter. He was really quite disappointed."

Charley smiled as much as to say that, though this may have been true once, it wasn't any longer. She asked him for a cigarette. As he leaned forward to pick up the box, he suddenly winced, and clutched his right shoulder.

"What is it?" I exclaimed.

Yvonne turned round. "Charley, you're not going to start —"

"Just a twinge," he gasped. "Don't worry. It will go."

We both watched him in silence. Yvonne was frowning. After a few seconds, he gingerly removed his hand from his shoulder, sighed and leaned back. "My old wound," he said to me. "It still gives me trouble."

"Oh Charley, for Heaven's sake, stop —" Yvonne was on the

point of speaking to him sharply. Then she kneeled down, and took both of his hands in hers. "Darling, you know it doesn't really hurt at all."

"It does," he said wearily. "As badly as ever."

"It can't. It's just your imagination, silly. The doctors have told you so often —"

"They were all talking through their hats, I tell you!" He winced, and put his hand to his shoulder again.

Yvonne made a despairing gesture and got up. At that moment a manservant announced that dinner was served.

Charley limped into the dining room, as though to suggest that the pain in his shoulder was now so excruciating that his whole body was suffering from the effect. But Yvonne took no notice, and pretty soon he appeared to have forgotten about it.

The table was spread with cold food of various kinds, and at each of our places there were two boiled eggs.

"Charley and I never have a proper dinner when he's working," Yvonne explained. "We prefer this kind of plebeian meal since we have to eat at half-past six. We decided you wouldn't mind being treated as one of the family."

"Paul's enough of a North-countryman to appreciate high tea, aren't you, old fellow?" Charley said, tapping the shell of one of his boiled eggs.

"Well, I'm pure North Country," Yvonne said. "And I never learned to appreciate it until I married Charley."

Yvonne poured out the tea which we drank with the meal. Afterwards, as if this were customary procedure, the manservant brought Charley a whisky and soda, and asked me whether I would like one.

"Are you sure?" Yvonne said when I refused. "Well, if you change your mind — you can help yourself."

"You see, Paul," Charley said as he lifted the glass to his lips, "I'm strictly rationed."

Yvonne distracted my attention by putting a cigarette between

her lips and signaling me to light it for her. "Have you heard the story of our courtship?"

"Only what Charley wrote me."

I glanced at him, but he didn't respond. "Anyway, I'd like to hear your side of it."

"Well, do you know, he never told me who he was. He took advantage of my ignorance and let me think I'd gone and got myself engaged to a corporal."

"What was so awful about that?" Charley said, as though she were launched on an anecdote that he would never tire of hearing her relate.

She took up the cue. "Nothing, darling. It would all have been perfectly splendid if the corporal had been a little less vague about what he was going to do for a living after he got out of the Army."

Charley smiled happily. "You see, Paul, she loved me for myself alone."

"At first sight. In fact, I knew I'd have to marry him — at least a month before he thought of asking me. He was so helpless and so grateful for any little attention — it broke one's heart. Just the same, I'd made up my mind I was being absurdly romantic and self-sacrificing. I was resigned to scrubbing floors for the rest of my life."

"But you must have known his name?" I said.

"Yes — but I'd never seen the famous Charles Stranleigh, and how was I to guess that my corporal, who hadn't breathed a word of the truth, could conceivably be the same man? He kept it dark from everyone in the hospital, and I didn't find out until I got home — and saw a picture of him in the newspaper. He'd been back about a month then himself — convalescing. Oh, God, Paul, I wish you could have overheard the scene when I told him I knew his secret. It was incredible." She began to laugh, and stood up in order to give an imitation of Charley. She tried to lower her voice to a deep contralto, though she didn't succeed in producing better than a comic croak. She placed one hand on her heart, and smote the air with the other. "I'm not an actor any longer. Can't you, won't you, please forget that

I ever was? If you'll marry me, I won't think of going back to the stage. I swear that, Gale.' Well, there I was with the wind completely taken out of my sails. I'd planned it so carefully. First, I'd meant to punish him a bit for having made a fool of me. And then I was going to let him see how pleased and excited I really was, and what a relief it was to know we wouldn't have to live on air. Now, all I could do was laugh, and the more I laughed the more upset he got." She went over to him, leaned down, and looked up at him coquettishly. "Do you remember, darling?"

Charley turned to me. "Would you have boasted of your identity, if you'd been in my place? This innocent child falling into the clutches of such a monster of depravity as that Stranleigh fellow. Naturally, I expected her to be scared out of her wits. I'd decided my only hope would be to renounce the stage and all its works."

"Oh, it was a tremendous renunciation," Yvonne resumed. "He was giving up a life of sin. He was turning over a whole volume of new leaves. He might have been a murderer or a bigamist or worse."

"I said that was roughly what your papa and mama would tell you I was," Charley reminded her. "And wasn't I right?"

"Yes, but even *they* had to admit it wouldn't have been a very bright idea to let you stop acting and go into business. That's what he offered to do, Paul. Quite seriously. Get a business job of some kind in Manchester. Can you imagine Charley as a businessman?"

"I've seen him as one," I smiled.

For a moment her eyes became serious. "Oh, of course, I forgot." I felt that, perhaps, she was envying me my longer acquaintance with him.

"Anyway, I finally convinced him that I was thrilled to find out who I was marrying, and that I didn't give a fig for his past. I said I wouldn't hear of him giving up the stage. In short, darling, I told you not to be an idiot, didn't I?" She patted his cheek, and returned to her place at the other end of the table.

"So here we are, Paul," Charley said, draining his glass. "Living happily ever after."

The manservant reappeared and announced that the car was waiting to take Charley to the theater. Yvonne jumped up. "There's no need for you to rush away, Paul, unless you have to," she said, as she went out, leaving the door open.

Charley and I followed her into the hall. She helped him into his coat, and put a scarf round his neck. "There," she said. "Now give a beautiful performance — and I'll be along later."

I waited on the doorstep while she went to see him safely into the car and kiss him good-by. She was smiling as she turned to join me, a sadder smile than any she had shown me before. Something of that feverish, restless quality had gone from her. In a curious, hardly definable way I realized that at last I was meeting the real Yvonne: Yvonne stripped of the mantle of pretense she wore in Charley's presence.

"Why don't you help yourself to a whisky and soda, Paul?" she said, indicating the open dining-room door. "And bring me one, too, would you?" I did so.

She toasted me. "You know, I'm glad you're back in England. I make up my mind very quickly about people. And I'm certain of two things as far as you're concerned. You're a sensible person. And you're genuinely fond of Charley. I feel I can count on you as an ally."

I guessed what was coming: she was having difficulty in controlling her errant genius. At the same time, I was glad to have won her confidence, for, unlike Algernon, I admired her for what she was trying to do, even though I perceived that she was blessed with more will power than intellect and more common sense than imagination.

So I listened sympathetically. But, at the end, I didn't see how I could be much use to her as an ally. I wondered ruefully if there was any way of making a tolerable husband out of Charley; if there was, I felt sure she hadn't found it.

CHAPTER XIX

CHARLEY AND I met for lunch at the club on one of his matinee days a week or so after I had dined at their house.

He sat puffing a cigar, and the steward had just brought him his second large brandy. He had consumed several pink gins before the meal and the better part of a bottle of wine during it — all on the pretext of celebrating our reunion.

"Aren't you exceeding your allowance a wee bit?" I said dryly.

"What do you mean?" The expression of secure well-being was suddenly wiped from his face. "Has Gale been talking to you?"

"You told me yourself, don't you remember? You said something about being strictly rationed."

"Did I?" He looked away for a moment. "Well, ordinarily I do try to limit myself. But this is a very special occasion, Paul. Anyway, my dear fellow," he said, with a wave of his cigar, "I've a matinee ahead of me. One needs a little stimulus if one's to give of one's best in a highly exacting part like Oedipus. The physical strain is so great. You know, alcohol is a definite help to some actors. Just as it is to some orators. Now, take F. E. Smith, for example —"

"Charley!" I held up my hand to halt this flow of eloquent nonsense. "You're not in court. You're not even being interviewed by a reporter."

His face fell. For a second or two, he was like a man who learns that his joke has been heard before. But he quickly recovered. "No use trying to pull the wool over your eyes, is it, Paul? Still, I don't want you running away with the idea that Charley's up to his old tricks again. Because that's not the case at all. No, the truth is I've

been suffering the tortures of the damned lately. From this wretched wound of mine." His hand wandered to his shoulder.

"Is it bothering you now?"

"Not at the moment, touch wood." He leaned down to burrow under the folds of the tablecloth. "But it was hurting like the very devil before lunch."

"And alcohol helps?"

"Nothing else does. Heaven knows what the trouble is! These damned doctors just say it will cure itself eventually. Meanwhile, they tell me to grin and bear it."

He took another, reviving swallow of brandy, then put down the glass and peered into it rather miserably. "Paul," he said, looking up at me, "I'd like you to help me out in a little innocent deception. It's just possible Gale may ask you about this luncheon of ours. If she does, be a good fellow and don't tell her I drank anything. It would upset her, and she might decide you were a bad influence. That would be a pity, because she's taken an enormous fancy to you, you know."

"It's reciprocated," I said meaningfully.

"I was sure it would be. But, you see, I'm afraid, like a lot of other people, Gale's inclined to judge me by my past reputation. She doesn't quite realize what I had to put up with in those days. I'm not trying to whitewash myself, mind you. But I did have an unusually difficult time of it, didn't I?"

"Oh, certainly you did, Charley."

"The position's entirely different now. I've no intention of throwing away this new chance. Of course, as I've told you, I have to drink a certain amount off and on — but that doesn't mean I'm turning into a drunkard again. As a matter of fact, I don't think I ever was one, strictly speaking, do you?"

His eyes pled with me to agree. "Well, no," I said doubtfully.

"Oh, I admit all that," he went on hurriedly, as though he knew what pictures must be flashing through my mind. "And don't imagine I'm not ashamed. I only wish I could be allowed to forget it. But I

could always pull myself together, if I really made the effort. You see what I mean?"

"Yes."

"Of course you do, Paul. Because you knew me then. But Gale didn't." He finished off his brandy in one gulp. "Naturally she can only go by what she hears. She thinks that once I've got the taste in my mouth, I'm practically done for. She doesn't credit me with any self-control at all."

He cleared away some cigar smoke that was getting into his eyes. "So that's why you're strictly rationed, is it?" I asked after a pause.

He nodded. "You see, Paul, I did slip up once, unfortunately. Oh, it was nothing very appalling, and it must be nearly a year ago now. But it was enough to confirm Gale's worst fears of what she considers my weakness. I had to set her mind at rest, and for her sake I'm still doing my best to keep the rules. However — there are moments —" He touched his shoulder. "Anyway, she won't worry as long as she doesn't know. So help me, will you, Paul?"

Yvonne had told me about his "slip-up." It was the only time he'd got really drunk in her experience. He'd talked quite "madly" and used the most beastly language to her: called her a "stupid little bitch," among other things. He accused her of treating him like an imbecile; blamed her for having given birth to a son instead of a daughter; implored her to pack up at once so that they could clear out of London for good and "go home." Afterwards, he remembered nothing, but when she told him he was miserably contrite. He agreed to let her ration his drinking in the future, and he gave her his word never again to touch a drop of alcohol without her prior knowledge and approval.

This arrangement, she said, had worked satisfactorily; he'd been "as good as gold" for a while. In fact, even now, she wouldn't have the slightest reason for worry if he hadn't started complaining, a few months ago, of periodic pain in his wounded shoulder. She'd taken him to several doctors, who were all agreed that his old wound

couldn't possibly be hurting him: it had healed perfectly. So she was forced to conclude that he had just invented an ailment in order to beg for more drink than she considered good for him. Well, she had to be firm with him when he did this, even though it led to bickering. He always gave in with a good grace in the end, she assured me.

Plainly, Yvonne was still unaware that Charley had broken his word to her, and I didn't consider it my business to enlighten her. Nevertheless, I felt sure that the days of her illusionment were numbered. In fact, I can say in retrospect that she and Charley were already approaching the end of any peace in their marriage at the time I first met them together. A second and far more shocking "slip-up" — a "slip-up" that she would not be able to forgive — was then inevitable.

It came at last in the following June. Yvonne had been spending a few days with her parents in Knutsford, and had been obliged to leave Charley on his own in London, because *Oedipus* was still running. She got back to town about eleven o'clock on a Sunday night. He was not at the station to meet her, although she had written to tell him the time of her train. Nor did she find him at home.

She felt hurt. However, she managed to persuade herself that he must have received a pressing invitation to dine out, and would be back shortly. She was tired after her journey, and she took a couple of aspirins before going to bed.

Some five hours later, she awoke with a start to realize that she was still alone. She heard no sound, but she felt as though a loud and insistent alarm bell, ringing in her dormant mind, had suddenly brought her to consciousness. She was panic-stricken. She dashed downstairs. She wanted to telephone: she had no idea to whom; but she wanted to get in touch with the outside world. The lights in the hall were on. Charley, she told herself breathlessly, must just this second have come in. She threw open the smoking-room door, and stopped dead.

The floor was littered with bottles, spilled cigarettes and ash. A woman's shoe lay in the middle of the debris. The woman herself sat sprawled at the end of the sofa. She had a mass of dark hair, falling in disarray; her long legs, in black silk stockings, were stretched lazily before her; her face was grotesquely smeared with lip salve. Charley lay supine with his head in her lap.

The woman was holding a glass of what looked like neat whisky in one hand, and with the other was clumsily stroking Charley's forehead. She was singing a popular song, softly but in drunkenly slow tempo, making it sound like a caricature of a lullaby.

For minutes on end (so it seemed to her) Yvonne stood in the doorway, unable to go forward or back. Neither of the others noticed her. Charley remained quite still. The woman went on wailing, nodding her head rhythmically as she mumbled the words.

"Charley!" Yvonne gasped at length.

He did not move. She supposed he must be insensible. Only the woman heard her. She tried to push the hair back from her eyes, as she focused them blearily on Yvonne. "Who the hell are you?"

"Clear out!" Yvonne shouted.

"What did I 'ear you say?"

"Clear out!"

"Don't you give me none of that lip, now. I'm taking care of the *gentleman*, see? I'll stay just as long as I bloody well please."

"This is my house!"

The woman gave a loud mirthless guffaw. "So you're 'is missus? Well, who'd have thought it? I beg your ladyship's pardon."

"Get out or I'll . . ."

"If you're so bloody 'igh and mighty, why can't you keep him at home?" The woman's tone was venomous. "Because 'e ain't got no real use for the likes of you — that's why. You're my kind, ain't you, darling?" She started stroking his head again.

Yvonne ran to the telephone. "Now! If you're not out of here within ten seconds, I'm going to call the police!" Her hand was on the receiver. She began to count aloud.

The woman pulled up her long legs, lifted Charley's head from her lap with a show of gentleness, and stood up. "All right, dearie, you can save your breath. I'll skedaddle."

"You'd better."

"I've 'alf a mind to bleedin' well learn you some manners."

She came towards Yvonne slowly and unsteadily, and stopped in front of her. For a moment it seemed as if she were going to strike Yvonne. But then she said almost plaintively, "You ought to thank me for bringing 'im 'ome — that's what you ought to do. 'E'd never have got 'ere on his lonesome."

She retrieved her shoe from the floor, then turned to blow a kiss at the prostrate form on the sofa. "Nighty night, darling," she cooed. "See you soon."

Yvonne wanted to cry, but she realized that her tears could not touch Charley's conscience. He was still insensible. He looked like a disfigured waxen image.

She started clearing up the mess in the room; she was careful to remove every last trace of it, and she worked as silently as possible. When she was done, she sat down and waited until she could arouse Charley from his stupor.

She regarded it as a mercy, a triumph even, that he eventually walked upstairs to bed under his own power before the servants came down, for otherwise they would have been witnesses of his disgrace. Actually, they already had some cause for gossip. As the nanny informed her next day, with grave-faced relish, Charley had not slept at home since Thursday night. On Saturday there had been several frantic telephone inquiries about him from the theater. Evidently, he had failed to turn up for either his matinee or evening performance. "Of course, we wasn't to know where he was," the nanny said. "And we didn't think it right to worry you, M'm."

Yvonne told the nanny that Charley had decided to join her in Knutsford. She invented some more plausible excuse for the theater management. She sent Charley off to his performance that evening after extracting a promise from him that he would give up drink

entirely. Thus she set a pattern of behavior that she was to follow in all the succeeding extremities of her life with him, save the last.

Yet, as I realized when she told me the story, she was utterly deprived of capacity to respect or trust him. Possibly, she remained for a while in love with the memory of having been in love with him, but it was pride alone — a refusal to admit defeat, an atavistic toughness — that had induced her to stick with him.

Though Charley was now embarked on a second period of tentative reform, which lasted, as it happened, for nearly a year, Yvonne regarded their marriage as basically insecure. She looked on him as unfit to be a husband or father. She refused to bear him another child. At the same time, she took complete charge of Gerald's upbringing. She started fostering in the boy contempt and something close to hatred for his father, in this way at once increasing and frustrating Charley's own desire for a daughter.

So it went on, with Charley always failing sooner or later to live up to his promises and Yvonne, despite the demands she made of him, in her heart expecting nothing better. Try as he might, he would never be able to redeem himself in her eyes. She treated him as a kind of pariah in her home.

Nevertheless, she preserved him as a famous actor; time and again she saved him from toppling off his pedestal. His career, in fact, was at its zenith throughout the twenties. He had failures, certainly. But he had a greater number of successes, including a few which excelled, perhaps, any he had achieved before the war. He was the supreme romantic actor of his day, and his frailties, though common gossip in greenroom circles, were kept a trade secret. With the general public, despite his increasingly frequent absences due to "indisposition," his reputation remained secure.

This would not have been possible without the influence that Yvonne battled to exercise over him. He was, professionally speaking, a business in which she had invested. I gave her credit for keeping this business going and for persuading the world at large to believe it thriving.

In other words, I thought that however badly off Charley might be with Yvonne, he would be worse off without her. And though, as the years passed, I became increasingly critical of her attitude towards him, which was so humiliating in its effect, I never endorsed the view of her detractors, like Algernon Hart, who believed that when Charley humiliated her in turn she was getting no more than she deserved. For I still identified Charley's welfare as a man with his position as an actor. That was the mistake I had made from the beginning.

CHAPTER XX

AT THE END of April of 1930, Charley was playing in a revival of *Othello*, which was shortly to close after a successful run of some six months. Its success, however, had owed considerably less to his performance than to the fashionable furor that a young lady with the prosaic name of Peggy Robinson had created as Desdemona.

She was an actress of little experience and less talent when she made her debut on the London stage in the late twenties. But she was lucky enough to have been entrusted with a part that required her to go into hysterics at the end of Act II. The simulation of hysteria happens to be the easiest trick in the histrion's bag, but most critics, as well as the general public, never fail to be impressed whenever it is worked passably well. Thus it was in Miss Robinson's case. A commercially wise management arranged that her next part should provide opportunity for louder and longer hysterics, not only at the end of Act II but in Act I and Act III also. This time, convinced beyond doubt of the worth of their "discovery," the critics acclaimed her even more rapturously. Desdemona followed. She played it hysterically — in a series of high-pitched staccato squeaks. The critics said her interpretation was pure genius.

When Charley absented himself from the cast less than a month after the first night there were uncharitable wiseacres who attributed his "indisposition" to professional jealousy of Miss Robinson, for they had heard stories, emanating from behind the scenes, that his manner to her had been markedly indifferent and far removed from his usual near-amorous attentiveness to leading ladies. These stories were true; but the conclusion was only partially so.

Admittedly, Charley, now that he had passed forty, was becoming acutely conscious of how greatly things had changed since his early days on the stage. Admittedly, he found the hyperbolic eulogies of Miss Robinson's Desdemona bewildering, perhaps irritating. What annoyed him more than her lack of talent, however, was her lack of physical appeal. He could not abide the excessively "un-actressy-looking" actresses who had become the vogue. Peggy Robinson, he told me, had a greasy face (which off the stage she seldom bothered to powder) and piano legs. "I can't understand," he said, "how so many of these extraordinarily ugly ducklings get on the stage nowadays — and do remarkably well, my dear boy. It never used to be like that."

Both Miss Robinson's success and the charge that he was jealous of it happened fortunately, however. For the one insured that the bookings for *Othello* were more or less unaffected by his prolonged absence from the cast (it lasted over a month), while the other helped Yvonne to conceal the truth concerning this breakdown, which was the most serious of his career up to the present. Persistent bouts of drinking had begun to undermine his health. The doctor had found both his heart and liver impaired, and advised a complete rest — otherwise dropsy might develop.

Charley returned to *Othello* in mid-December. He was apparently recovered, but the regime under which he was living had never been so strict. Yvonne had disposed of their London home and they had moved to a house in Oxfordshire, not far away from the preparatory school where Gerald, now aged ten, was a boarder. Alcohol was excluded from this house; at least, it was so far as Charley knew. Actually, Yvonne kept a supply for guests in a special hiding place of her own.

Faber, their trusted chauffeur, drove him to his work and waited at the stage door, like a sentinel, to drive him back again. This man had served in the same platoon as Charley during the war, and had written to him about a year before asking for a job. Yvonne, even though she had happened at the time to be on the lookout for a

chauffeur, had agreed with reluctance to employing Faber, for she suspected that he was probably a drunkard like Charley himself. But it had turned out extremely well. Faber worshiped Charley, and he was also a pillar of moral rectitude. As a final precaution, Yvonne had cut Charley off from funds, including pocket money. She had persuaded him to close his bank account, and she had got him to arrange with the business manager at the theater for his salary to be paid by check directly into her own account. The only money she allowed him was the tip for his dresser, which she handed him at the end of each week.

At the beginning of May, when *Othello* closed, Charley was still apparently submitting to these new regulations. I didn't imagine he would go on doing so indefinitely. But remorse customarily induced him to be obedient for a certain length of time. Besides, the threat of dropsy, remote though it was, had given him a real fright.

A few weeks later, I received a letter from Yvonne in which she said that she had decided to "take my advice." (I had lately been urging her to give Charley the feeling that in their relationship she was more dependent on him than he on her, for it was my belief, remembering Lise's example, that if she would or could do this, she might get a better response from him than any she had done by acting as his keeper.) Well, now she wrote she had found a way to thrust on Charley that extra sense of responsibility towards her which I contended would be the making of him. She was going to set him up in management.

His savings (which were at present in her name, of course) were not nearly enough to finance the venture, for, as I knew, he had been shamefully improvident, and there was precious little left out of all he had earned since their marriage. So she intended to use a sizeable chunk of her own capital, and, if anything could, this surely should make him conscious of his responsibility towards her. (She was now a wealthy woman, for, at her father's death

a couple of years ago, she had inherited the family business.)

With her letter, she enclosed a typescript of a new play which she believed would make an excellent opener for Charley as an actor-manager. She asked for my opinion of the play and invited me to spend the following week end with her and Charley.

The play, *Stranger and Stranger*, was the work of one Pirbright Watson. It struck me as an unhappy mixture of Tchekov and water and Shaw and water. Moreover, the part that I assumed to be intended for Charley — that of Theobald, the proprietor of a fashionable flower shop — lacked charm and was unrewarding. I decided to warn Yvonne that should she allow Charley to embark on his managerial career with this play, he would lose her money, however impeccable his moral conduct might be.

The nearest railway station was five miles from their house — which, in turn, was about a mile away from a small village. Faber, a short, stocky man with a long nose and a kindly look, was on the platform to meet me. Yvonne waited in the car. At thirty-two she still had a youthful figure, but her face was beginning to fall in, like a sinking pudding, and her smile was brittle.

"Haven't you brought a coat with you, Paul?" She had got into the habit of nursing others besides Charley. "It gets chilly here in the evenings. Here," she pulled up the rug from the floor, "stick this round you. And you'd better shut that window. I don't want you catching cold."

"How's Charley?"

"Oh — on his best behavior. Tickled to death with the idea of being an actor-manager. His lifelong ambition fulfilled *et cetera*, *et cetera*, and a knighthood in his grasp!" She was doing her imitation of him, of which she had never tired. "He's been out golfing this afternoon. Tomorrow he's playing in the parents' cricket match." She laughed suddenly. "Poor Gerald! Listen to this, Paul." She fished in her handbag, and brought out a letter written in a boy's unformed hand. She held it up to the fading light.

Dearest Mummy,

I hope you are quite well. I am. I'm looking forward like anything to Saturday. Are you sure it's all right father being in the team? If not, couldn't you persuade him not to be? I expect they'd get one of the masters instead. They have to sometimes, Tomkins Minor says!

She folded the letter and replaced it in her bag. "Whatever do you imagine's going on in his dear little head?"

"I suppose he imagines Charley's going to arrive drunk, and start turning somersaults on the pitch — or something."

She sighed. "It's a terrible thing for a father to lose his son's respect. But what else did Charley expect?"

I made no answer.

"Anyhow, now that he's in management he's being given the best chance he ever had to be a credit to his family, and I hope he'll take it. I can't do any more for him. Faulkner's staying tomorrow night with us, by the way." Faulkner was the man who ran the Manchester firm under her remote control. "Arriving in time for dinner. So is the young playwright, Pirbright Watson. Isn't it a silly name? I haven't met him yet. . . . Did I tell you we're spending the summer holidays in Varongeville?" She ran on in her high-pitched voice, which was more artificially trilling and less gay than it used to be. "We plan to open at the beginning of October, but the preliminary details must be settled before we go away. We still haven't found a theater. I've been offered a long lease of the Macready. But I don't know. It's always been a white elephant, hasn't it? Besides, I'd rather we were somewhere with more tradition — like the Haymarket. Oh, what do you think of our play?"

"You haven't bought it, have you?"

"Of course I have. I told you — it's to be our opening production. Don't you like it?"

"Not much."

"Well, you must tell the young man frankly what's wrong with

it. He'll have to put it right. He knows you've read the play, and writes that he'll be very grateful for your criticisms."

It was characteristic of her to have arranged everything in this fashion. She glanced at me with a faint hint of apology in her expression. "You don't mind talking to him, do you?"

"No, of course not. The only thing is — well, to be quite honest, my dear, it's not simply a question of technical faults —"

"Oh, don't you think he's got hold of a jolly good idea? I do. I'm sure all the play needs is professional polish. You show him how. Anyway, it's bound to succeed."

"Why?"

"Because he wrote it for Peggy — in the first place. She let me read it, and I snaffled it just in time."

"What?" I shifted suddenly, and the rug fell from my knees. I knew that Yvonne had struck up quite a friendship with Peggy Robinson during the run of *Othello*. It was natural that she should have, for Peggy was successful, she wasn't "like an actress," and she was a leading lady for Charley above suspicion of becoming his mistress. But this news surprised me none the less. "You mean Peggy's going to play the girl?"

"She's dying to."

"Does Charley want her?"

"No, he doesn't. He says she's a rotten actress. What he really means is, that she hasn't got any sex appeal. I wish you'd persuade him that it makes no difference whether his leading lady attracts him as long as she attracts the customers."

"You know my opinion of Peggy Robinson."

"You know I don't agree with it. Neither do the critics, Paul. Anyway, she's a tremendous draw at the moment. If Charley won't give in, this boy with the funny name will just have to put his foot down. He'll have to tell Charley he won't allow the play to be done without Peggy."

"The actor-manager himself," Yvonne said, as we met Charley at the house. "You can see he's already acquired quite a managerial air."

He was sitting at a table, poring over a copy of the *Times*. He was dressed in plus fours and wearing a pair of large horn-rimmed spectacles which he removed as he got up to welcome me.

"I assume Yvonne has told you all about our new venture." He seldom called her Gale nowadays.

"Yes. You must be very pleased."

"Oh, I am, my dear fellow — delighted. You know, I've wanted to go into management for years."

"And you like the play?"

"Yvonne assures me it's a masterpiece. I haven't been allowed to read it yet."

"Don't believe a word he says," Yvonne chipped in. "The night before I sent it to you, I sat him down in that chair over there and literally put the script in his hands. I came back a couple of hours later, and he was fast asleep. He hadn't got further than page 2. Admit it, Charley."

"Ah, well," he said, "I've usually found the better a play is, the quicker it sends me to sleep. I'm a man of limited intellect."

"You're growing lazy, darling — that's your trouble. He never reads anything now except the newspaper."

Reading his newspaper had, in fact, become something of a passion with him during the last few years. He made a thorough job of it, never skipping a word, with the result that he carried in his head a mass of information on topical events of every description. I suspected that he found this socially advantageous.

At any rate, I recognized it as typical of his current conversational style when at dinner he began talking of a month-old news item, and I was taken aback to find out a minute or two later that he had a devious purpose in mentioning it. He recalled how Tallulah Bankhead had appeared at the Oxford Gas Works in order to take part in a balloon ascent organized by the undergraduates. "She was kissed

and rechristened Balloonah," he said, as he took a helping of the entree. "Rather charming, don't you think?"

"Yes," I agreed without interest. I was already familiar with the story.

He put down his knife and fork. "Now, there's a real actress for you!" he said emphatically, staring straight at Yvonne.

Yvonne was concentrating on her food. She ate in a businesslike way, dispatching whatever dish might be put before her as speedily and efficiently as possible. "How do you know?" she said without looking up. "You've never even seen her."

"Ah, but I can tell, my dear. I can tell from her name. Tallulah — it smells of the footlights, doesn't it, Paul? That's the kind of name an actress should have. Tallulah — or even Balloonah. But not Betty or Margie or" — he made a gesture, as though pulling another one out of the hat — "or Peggy."

I glanced from him to Yvonne. She went on munching. He waited for some response to the challenge he had thrown down. "Eat," she said at last, with a flick of her fork in his direction. "It'll be cold, and then you'll start complaining."

She was content, I supposed, to wait until tomorrow night, when she could use the young dramatist to put an end to her husband's recalcitrance. Poor Charley, I thought, as the scene played itself out. He was like a puppet king, making a futile bid to rule. He was a manager who would never be allowed to manage anything.

We went to the school cricket match. Charley did the opposite of disgracing his son. He saved the parents' side from a humiliating defeat. The headmaster congratulated Yvonne on "having a Woolley for a husband," the boys cheered him lustily and even Gerald was impressed. Charley himself was plainly delighted with his little triumph.

After tea, which was a feast of fruit salad and cream buns in the school dining room, the grown-up visitors adjourned to the head-

master's private quarters for more enlivening refreshments. "What can I get you, Stranleigh?" the headmaster inquired. "Sherry, whisky and soda, a cocktail . . .?"

Charley obviously meant to refuse a drink of any kind, but Yvonne, who was beside him, wouldn't take the risk. "Oh nothing, thank you," she said firmly.

I observed the expression on his face, and I wasn't surprised that he shortly insisted on leaving. From his point of view, the whole expedition had turned sour. He had blown a tiny bubble of self-respect, and almost immediately it had been pricked.

He uttered hardly a word on the way back, though Yvonne couldn't understand why he should be "so gloomy" considering the success he'd had and, after trying vainly to cheer him up, became irritated.

His meeting with Pirbright Watson, therefore, took place in most unpropitious circumstances.

The latter was allegedly a young man of twenty-three. He looked much older, for he was extremely fat. His manner, too, suggested that he had lived long enough to be disillusioned by the world and to bear a grudge against its inhabitants. When Yvonne introduced him to me, he held out his small soft hand reluctantly, as though it were a precious thing which he feared I might maltreat, and he said how-do-you-do as if he expected to be insulted and were ready to give as good as he might get. He talked a lot, but mostly in a kind of whine.

Charley, I could tell, disliked him on sight. I realized that he wasn't Yvonne's type either, but since she drew a sharp distinction between business and pleasure—and he came under the former heading—she was determined to make herself agreeable to him. Faulkner, Yvonne's manager, who had also arrived as promised, appeared merely puzzled by Pirbright Watson, just as he appeared puzzled by Charley and by Yvonne herself, so long as she spoke of the theater and not of cotton. What Faulkner's Christian name was I never knew, for Yvonne called him just Faulkner to his face or

occasionally, in commendatory moments, Faulk. He was an upstanding man, with thinning gray hair brushed back from his forehead, and receding gums.

Yvonne decreed that there was time to dress for dinner, and Pirbright Watson came down wearing a double-breasted dinner jacket of dark blue material. He received Yvonne's hurried announcement that cocktails would not be served with a "But of course, my dear," and a swift, somewhat smirking glance at Charley, who was standing with his back to the room, gazing out of the window.

Charley sat at the head of the dinner table, a monument of dignified silence. Faulkner kept his elongated teeth on permanent display, feeling no doubt that to grin was the only way to conceal his boredom and embarrassment. The conversation among Yvonne, Pirbright Watson and myself, jejune though it was in content, nevertheless flowed. Pirbright showered us with news of Gerald and Lilian and Noel and Ivor and Gladys and Harry, leaving us with the impression not so much that Gerald du Maurier or Lilian Braithwaite or Noel Coward or Ivor Novello or Gladys Cooper or Henry Ainley had done or said anything of remarkable interest recently as that they were one and all his intimate friends.

"Poor Angus has another *frightful* flop," he was saying, as he dipped the tips of his fingers into the dessert bowl that had just been put before him. "I hear the whole thing's too awful."

"Angus Ross?" Yvonne said. "I've been wondering about him as producer."

"Of *my* play?"

"Yes. Charley likes him. Don't you darling?"

"I do," Charley said, at last breaking his silence.

Pirbright turned to him. "Oh, but don't you honestly think he's just a little bit too *vieux jeu*?" Then, getting no response, he turned back to Yvonne, "Noel was saying the other day that though Angus must be at *least* eighty now, he's still too pixy for words! You know, Gladys told me that *she* was in a play he produced once, and he didn't tell her a thing, not a thing! She found it an absolutely devas-

tating experience trying to work for him. I won't have *Stranger and Stranger* turned into a fairy tale."

"Isn't it one?" Charley said with more malice than I should have believed him capable of. He got up.

"Sit down," Yvonne ordered.

"I thought we might adjourn."

"In a minute, we will. We'd better settle this problem while we're at it. You won't mind our talking shop for a bit, will you, Paul?"

"Of course not," I said, and noticed Faulkner hastily get out a handkerchief. His grin had become so fixed that he might as well have been sitting in a dentist's chair, keeping his mouth wide open. He had suddenly realized that a trickle of saliva was descending his chin.

"Now, Watson . . ." Yvonne started, so determinedly businesslike that she was betrayed into this slip of addressing her young dramatist as though he were her manager.

Pirbright threw up his hands. "Oh, *please*, don't call me by my surname like that. It reminds me of *the* most dreadful period of my life: public school."

Yvonne patted his arm. "I'll call you Pirbie. Who would you suggest for producer?"

"Oh, I'd like someone like Oliver. Oliver would be marvelous. Simply marvelous."

"Oliver who?" she asked impatiently.

"Cranwood, of course."

"Hmmm," said Yvonne, and put her thumb to the tip of her chin, as she often did when she wanted to reflect. I suspected, though, that she had never heard of Oliver Cranwood. "I wonder if he's experienced enough."

"Oh, my dear, of course he is!" Pirbright replied. He seemed to regard the smallest hint of disagreement with his views as a personal affront. "Anyway we don't want some horribly pedestrian producer who's experienced and otherwise half-witted."

"Charley," Yvonne said. "Let's have your opinion of Oliver Cranwood."

"Unfortunately, I have none." He was staring at his dessert knife, which he was using as a plaything. "The name escapes me."

"Oh, I'm positive you'd adore working with Oliver," Pirbright intervened quickly. "He's inspirational. Peggy absolutely worships him. They did a Sunday night production together last year, and she told me afterwards she'd felt a sort of magical affirmation with him."

Charley had glanced up at the mention of Peggy, and now gazed stonily at Pirbright. The latter, once again, turned back to Yvonne.

"That raises another problem," she said. "Charley's not convinced that Peggy's right for the part."

"Not right! But I wrote it for her. She's in every line. She is the part." He seemed near bursting into tears. "It would be sheer infanticide not to have her."

Yvonne smiled. "I haven't said I disagree with you, Pirbie. It's Charley you've got to persuade."

Pirbright appeared to be inflating himself for a new verbal ascent, but was interrupted by Charley, who spoke with finality. "I don't care for Miss Robinson."

"Why not?"

"Because — if I may be allowed to quote another dramatist who is honoring my table — she has such thick ankles. Haven't you noticed them?"

"I'm really not interested in her ankles."

"Then you should consider yourself a very fortunate young man."

Pirbright virtually tossed his head. "If you're afraid her part is more showy than yours, I can promise you it isn't. Theobald is the whole play."

Yvonne stretched out a mollifying hand to him. "Pirbie," she murmured sweetly, "Charley hasn't said he *won't* have Peggy. I should hate you to think there was any question of professional

jealousy. No, we're just trying to decide who'd be best for the part — quite impartially. It's your play, after all. So if you insist on Peggy —"

"Of course I insist!"

"Then that's all there is to it," Yvonne said, fixing a "don't-you-dare" look on Charley.

"And I insist on Oliver, too," Pirbright added in a kind of petulant flurry.

"We'll see," Yvonne said in her most nurselike tone.

Charley had risen. "I take it the conference is over?"

Yvonne turned to me. "Paul, when would you like to talk to Pirbie about his play? Now seems as good a time as any."

"All right."

"Then I think —" She put her thumb to her chin. "Yes, I think we'll stay here. Charley, you take Faulkner off for a bit, and keep him amused. You might," she said, waving her arm vaguely in the direction of the window, "you might show him the pigs."

Without a word, Charley held the door open for Faulkner. "Don't get lost," she called after them. "And don't stay away too long, Faulk. I may want to talk to you later."

She went to the door, opened it slightly, peered out, closed it and turned the key in the lock.

"Now," she said, as she sauntered back to the table, "before we go any further, perhaps you two would like a drink."

We must have spent about an hour and a half discussing the play. Each of my criticisms was greeted by Pirbright with a grudging initial admission that I might be right and then a flood of rodomontade imploring me to believe that I was horribly, vandalistically wrong. Eventually I was worn down into agreeing that Pirbright had written a faultless masterpiece.

When we returned to the living room, Faulkner was sitting alone, legs apart, flicking miserably through the pages of a literary magazine.

"Where's Charley?" Yvonne asked sharply.

"Gone into the village," Faulkner replied, getting to his feet. "He said he wouldn't be long. He just had to see the carpenter."

"Carpenter? What carpenter?"

"Well, I thought he said carpenter." Faulkner stroked his hair. "It was someone he had a job of work for, anyway."

She stood still, and bit her lip. I knew that she was struggling to control both her alarm and her inclination to let fly at Faulkner for having allowed Charley out of his sight. After a long pause, she asked quietly, "Did he happen to borrow from you, Faulk?"

"Well, as a matter of fact —" Faulkner began rubbing his face nervously.

"How much?"

"Only a fiver. He said he might as well pay —"

"Yes," she said in a quick attempt to cover up, "the carpenter. I know. I thought he probably hadn't any money on him. Well, remind me to pay you back, won't you? We'll have our talk tomorrow." She turned away, and in so doing became aware that she had left Pirbright and me standing.

"For Heaven's sake sit down — all of you! What are we being so formal about?" She gave a forced laugh. "You look as if you were at a Court levee — or something."

She moved as if to sit down herself, but then stopped dead. "Excuse me a minute, will you please?" she muttered, and walked out of the room with her brisk, purposeful footsteps.

I supposed that the other two must be just as aware of the atmosphere of crisis as I was, but none of us referred to it. Faulkner and I embarked on a desultory conversation about Manchester. Pirbright lit one of his gold-tipped cigarettes and, holding it affectedly, shoulder high, began a languid inspection of the books and pictures.

After a quarter hour or so, the nanny (who had been elevated to the position of housekeeper when Gerald ceased to need her care) waddled in, and said to me in a self-important whisper that I was "wanted." As I followed her out, I was aware of an expression on

Pirbright's face in which amusement, contempt, irritation and a kind of malicious excitement were mixed.

Yvonne was sitting, with her head in her hands, at the dining-room table, which had now been cleared.

"Paul," she said wearily, as soon as I had closed the door behind me, "tell me some way I can get rid of them!"

"You mean Faulkner and —"

"Oh, I can rely on Faulk's loyalty. But that horrible little pansy. The moment he gets back to town on Monday he'll start spreading it all over the place that Charley —"

"If he goes now, he'll spread it all the sooner. I think it's a great pity you ever got involved with him," I said, sitting down at the opposite end of the table.

"How was I to guess what he was like?" she said, lifting her head. She had a handkerchief squeezed in her hand. "Besides, ordinarily what would it have mattered? He's still written a first-class play, hasn't he?" I raised my eyebrows. "Well, at least a play that stands a jolly good chance of making money."

"Don't you think it might be wiser to let Charley arrange things for himself?"

"What things?"

I pressed my fingers against my eyelids. "Everything. Let him choose what play he wants to do and let him cast it himself. If you want him to be a manager, why not allow him to make up his own mind?"

"So that we'd get precisely nowhere!" She slammed the table with her open palm and glared at me. "Good Heavens, Paul, surely you must know by this time what Charley is! He loves the *idea* of being in management, but he's not prepared to deal with the practical details." Her indignation was boiling over. "Do you suppose I *want* to run his business for him? But if I didn't, he'd just be a label. A manager without a play, without a cast — a producer — a theater — anything! *Ugly legs*," she said explosively. "Suppose you had a play that was a certain success if you had a particular actress in the lead-

ing part, would you refuse to engage her because you had some objection to her legs? And you wonder I interfere! You blame me for it! In the name of sense, what else do you expect me to do? Sit back and let him throw all our money down the drain?"

"No, of course not," I said impatiently. "But —"

"But what? Be more tactful! Don't upset him! Don't hurt his feelings! How would you cope with him if you were in my place?"

Her eyes glistened with tears, and she began dabbing at them with her handkerchief. I got up slowly and went to her. "You mustn't think I'm unsympathetic, my dear."

She permitted me to comfort her. "I'm sorry, Paul," she managed to say at last. "I've been beastly to you. But — well, I get to the point when I have to pitch into someone. I'm afraid I've used you as a whipping boy." She laughed unhappily.

"Now, what would you like me to do? Go and look for Charley?"

"No, I've sent Faber to search the neighboring pubs. He may be miles away by this time." She took out her compact. "After all, with five pounds in his pocket he can last quite a while, can't he?" She finished repairing the damage to her face.

"Well, hadn't we better get back to the others?"

"I suppose so," she said, though she didn't move.

"There's no way you can get rid of Pirbright at this hour of the night. And the less concern you show from now on, the less temptation he'll have to talk when he gets back to town."

"All right, Paul." She placed both hands flat on the table and rose heavily. "Pray God there won't be a scene in public," she whispered just before we re-entered the living room. "Pray God there won't be."

When she faced the others she wore an air of self-conscious brightness. She suggested a game of bridge, and, since she had the knack of making her suggestions sound like commands, nobody demurred. The cards were got out, and we sat down.

We may have played for an hour or more. We were interrupted by a sudden scuffle. The door burst open, and Charley lurched in. He was coatless and collarless; his shoes, trousers and boiled shirt-front were covered with mud, and there was mud on his face, too. He swayed, and a hand from behind gripped his elbow. I saw that it belonged to Faber, who was carrying Charley's coat over his free arm. "This way, sir," he said, trying to turn his master round. "You don't want to stay here."

"Yes, I do." Charley mumbled. "I have an ultimatum in my pocket. I wish to address this — this — conference." He pronounced the last word slurringly. "Unhand me, wretch!" he shouted with unexpected force, and added incongruously, "there's a good fellow."

"Paul," Yvonne cried. "Please help Faber."

We were all on our feet except Pirbright, who had not moved. He was holding his cards before him like a fan, and was peeking over them.

"Keep your distance, sir," Charley thundered as I stepped forward. "Keep your distance — you're in league with my detractors. Keep your distance," he repeated to himself, as though he considered the phrase a happy one of his own invention.

I halted at a warning sign from Faber, who obviously believed that he knew from experience how to handle Charley. "Come on, sir," he pled.

"For God's sake, Charley," Yvonne commanded shrilly, "go to bed! Don't you realize what an appalling exhibition you're making of yourself?"

He peered at her shiftingly, as though trying to get her features into proper focus. "Do you think you can deliver my ultimatum for me?" he said, wagging a finger in front of her face. "Do you? Well, you bloody well can't, because you don't know what it is. This is one thing I'm afraid you'll have to let me do on my own." Then he added mildly, as an afterthought, "It wouldn't be right for you to do it any road."

Yvonne appealed mutely to Faber. "Leave him to me, madam,"

he reassured her in a whisper. She turned her back on Charley, and walked to the far end of the room.

"I shall now speak!" Charley declared, and made such a sweeping gesture that he would have lost his balance if Faber hadn't caught hold of him in time.

"Why not wait till tomorrow, sir?" Faber coaxed.

"Can't wait. Too important. Silence!" his voice boomed. "Pray silence for your actor-manager — Sir Charles Stranleigh, Knight."

He lurched forward, breaking away from Faber's grasp, and then pulled himself erect. "My lords, ladies and gentlemen," he began, as though he really imagined he was delivering a speech. "Since you have made it abundantly obvious that you can get on without me, and prefer to do so, I have decided to retire from management and hereby tender my resignation. I designate my wife, Lady Stranleigh, as my successor. I wish you all good-by."

He started to bow, and Faber gripped his arm again to prevent him from falling flat on his face. That might have been the end of the scene if Pirbright hadn't failed to stifle an audible titter.

"Who dared to laugh?" Charley shouted furiously, straightening and then reeling round like a half-blinded prize fighter in search of his jabbing, tormenting opponent.

He spotted Pirbright, who met his glare with a kind of half-frightened, half-impudent sneer.

"So it was you! The fairy dramatist. The dramatist who likes actresses with balloon legs."

He began moving towards him, very slowly, picking his steps. "Well, there's some'at I want to tell you, lad. Happen, you fancied you were in clover with Lady Stranleigh for a patroness. Happen you fancied you could twist Sir Charles round your little finger by getting Her Ladyship on your side. But you were mistaken, weren't you, lad? You were mucking well mistaken. I'm not accepting orders from my wife, understand. I'm not going to be dictated to by one of your kind either, understand. The two of you can confer together for as

long as you bloody well like. Nothing you decide will have any effect on Sir Charles. He's retired. He won't touch any offer you want to make him with the end of a bleeding bargepole. Lady Stranleigh can take you and your fairy play and your fairy producer and your ugly bitch of an unsexed leading lady where they belong. To the National Theater, in Sodom and Gomorrah!"

Pirbright jumped to his feet, white and trembling. He started hurling pygmy insults at Charley, who let out a roar of obscene abuse in return. I helped Faber drag Charley from the room. Yvonne closed the door after us, and Charley, his final outburst having apparently exhausted him, became a dead weight on our hands. We carried him to bed.

Yvonne was alone when I came down again.

"Did he pass out?" She spoke without turning to me. She was inert, like someone who has survived a long siege of illness.

"Yes. He should sleep it off now. Have the others gone up?"

She nodded, then got to her feet as though she had finally mustered sufficient strength to do so. "Paul, I'm arranging for Faber to drive the Watson youth up to town after breakfast tomorrow. Would you be a dear and go with him?"

"With *Pirbright*?"

"It isn't that I want you out of the house. You know that. But I honestly can't face talking to the wretched youth myself until Charley's apologized, and I'm quite sure I won't even be able to get Charley out of bed in the morning. He'll be feeling too ill for one thing, and for another he'll be feeling too ashamed of himself. You might be able to persuade the young man that for his own sake he'd better keep his mouth shut."

"I'll try if you like. But —"

"Thank you, Paul. You're a wonderful friend."

She went to the door. I saw that she was quite recovered from her lassitude of a few moments ago. Amazingly, she was strong and in full possession of her determination again.

"You don't really intend to go ahead with this play, do you?" I was sure that she did, but I made my tone deliberately incredulous.

She turned to me, before leaving the room. "Paul," she said decisively, "you'll think me an awful fool, but I've made up my mind I can't desert Charley at this point. I'm going to give him one more chance."

CHAPTER XXI

WITHIN A FEW DAYS the sordid story of Charley's behavior was being bandied about theatrical London. Pirbright had returned in a vengeful mood and must straightway have started seeking advice and consolation from all his friends.

This did not deter Yvonne. When I had rung her up on the Sunday evening she told me that I "need not worry," that she felt certain "everything was going to be all right." Charley had waked up thoroughly ashamed of himself. He was now quite prepared — even anxious — to be "reasonable." He had promised faithfully to abandon his "stupid" prejudice against acting with Peggy Robinson and to co-operate wholeheartedly in beginning his managerial career with the "certain success" she had found for him. She prayed God that he'd have the sense and decency to live up to his good intentions. After all, it *was* his dearest wish, wasn't it — he'd always said it was, at any rate — to be in management? And he must know perfectly well that if he threw away this opportunity, he'd never get another.

So Charley paid the full price for his latest "one more chance" and in due course wrote Pirbright a letter of abject apology. I was not surprised that the latter was persuaded by this to forgive and forget the affront he had suffered. In the light of reason, he would presumably rather have his play produced by the Stranleighs than by nobody at all.

Yvonne plunged on. When she left for Varongeville with Charley and Gerald for their scheduled summer holiday, she had already appointed a skeleton staff, taken a five years' lease of the Macready

and committed Charley to opening it with his "certain success" at the beginning of October.

They had rented a small villa at Varongeville, and when I stayed with them there for a few days in August Charley was still "being reasonable." His status, however, reminded me of a fallen statesman in "protective custody." He was allowed, under escort, to indulge in tennis, golf, and sea bathing, but the casino was definitely out of bounds and his visitors were carefully selected.

A disturbing incident occurred on the day before my departure. It was a gorgeous afternoon, and we had gone to the beach. "It's a pity you can't stay on a bit longer," Yvonne said, glancing up at the sky.

"It is indeed," I agreed.

Charley, having finished his swim, was stretched full length on the sand, apparently asleep. Gerald, still in the water, was making idle but persistent efforts to mount a rubber swan.

"Why don't you, then?" she said, as though that settled it.

"I'm afraid it isn't possible."

"Nonsense. We haven't got anybody else coming until next week. Don't tell me you're such a busy little man that you have to rush back to London at this time of the year."

I laughed. "As a matter of fact, that's just what I am. I had a letter from my agent this morning. He wants me to sign a contract, and when I've done that — touch wood — I'll be leaving for America."

"You will?" Her attention at the moment was distracted by Gerald who was becoming too adventurous for her comfort. "You'd better come in now, darling," she yelled at him, accompanying her words with the appropriately frantic gestures.

"Well, well," she said as soon as she was satisfied that Gerald meant to obey her. "You're not deserting us for good, are you?"

"Oh, no. But it looks as if I'm to have a play produced on Broadway at last, and I'd like to be there for the rehearsals."

"A new play?"

"No, the first one I ever wrote. At least the first on record."

"Not that thing Charley was in?" she asked casually, her eyes fixed on Gerald, who was slowly paddling towards us, kicking the water in front of him.

"Yes. It's extraordinary really, that after all these years —"

"Who is to be the leading man?" A voice on the other side of me murmured.

"Good Heavens, Charley! I'd no idea you were with us."

I saw that he had spoken without so much as opening his eyes, but now he raised himself on his elbows, and looked at me. "Naturally, I'm interested."

"Well, Alton Snow's putting on the play," I said, referring to a young American actor who had appeared in London a year or so back. "I imagine for himself."

"Ah, yes. He's supposed to be very gifted, isn't he?"

"I'm not sure it isn't an exaggeration to describe any of these modern actors as very gifted. Still, I'm hoping he'll be all right."

"I hope so, too, for your sake — Paul — though frankly I find it a little hard to imagine a Yankee as the ideal Wainewright." For a moment or two he stared ahead of him, then he sank back, putting his hands behind his head. "A pity I can't do it for you. But I suppose in America they'd say I was too ancient — they're chronically in love with youth over there, aren't they? Or perhaps they've never even heard of me."

He closed his eyes again. There had been no note of rancor in his tone, and it did not occur to me that he had said less than he meant. Later, however, it was obvious that something had upset him. He was in one of his morose and silent moods.

The three of us were supposed to be dining out in Deauville, but at the last moment Charley refused to go, and Yvonne, not daring to leave him alone, was forced to cancel the engagement. We ate a scratch meal at home. Charley sulked throughout the evening.

I had been in bed about half an hour, though I was still reading, when there was a knock on the door, and he walked in. He was wearing slippers and a silk dressing gown over his evening clothes.

He stood rather self-consciously by the door. "I want to apologize, Paul," he said, as though he had been ordered to.

"Oh, that's all right," I murmured.

He came and sat down at the foot of the bed. "I know I'm in the wrong, my dear fellow, but it did come as rather a blow. I hate the idea of anyone else playing Wainewright."

I stared at him in amazement. "But Charley!" There were so many *but's*. Of course, it often happens that actors show resentment when parts, which they have grown too old to play themselves, are given to younger men. But I should never have suspected *him* of this failing. . . . He had always seemed so careless of what he did in his profession. "Charley, you're not free to play the part. You're going into management!"

"Oh, I realize I've no right to expect you to hold it permanently in reserve for me. But, you know, I've always felt rather a proprietary interest in it — and —"

"I hope you don't think I've forgotten how much the play owed to you. I'll never forget that you were largely responsible for my first success."

"Nonsense, my dear fellow!" He raised his hand, and let it fall back on his thigh. "There's only one person in the world responsible for *your* success. And his name's Paul Hunter. You know that as well as I do, don't you?" He smiled. "Just the same, I'd like to think I'd been — well, your lucky mascot. I haven't brought many people luck, have I? Not people I'm fond of."

He gazed at me penetratingly, and I was beggared of speech. After a pause, he asked guilelessly, "Paul, leaving me out of it, are you sure you're wise to allow the play to be produced in New York — with a Yankee actor as Wainewright and a Yankee cast? It's such a superb play — the finest you ever wrote, in my opinion. It would be a crying shame to have it ruined. I should have thought it too subtle, too delicate, too — full of tradition — for them to do it justice over there."

I rubbed my forehead. "Well — to be frank with you, Charley —

I've always wanted to go to America. And this gives me a good excuse."

"Ah yes, I understand." He shifted his position. "In a way, I envy you. I'd like to be invited across the Atlantic myself — on business. But I saw quite a lot of the world in days gone by, and, though you'll probably think me an old stick-in-the-mud for saying so, I still prefer England."

He got up, and, with his hands thrust in his dressing-gown pockets, began moving about the room. He came to a halt by the washbasin. "Paul, supposing I had been free, tell me honestly — would you have asked me to play the part?"

"Why, yes, of course, provided I —"

He swung round. "You wouldn't have been afraid I'd let you down?"

"I'll tell you what, Charley," I said in a quick endeavor to reassure him. "As soon as I get the chance, I'll write another play for you."

"Do you mean that?" There was a look in his eyes like that of a child who has been offered a new toy in place of an old broken one.

"Certainly, I do."

"I shall hold you to that promise, Paul." He pointed a finger at me. "To do a play of yours under my own management — you ought to know that nothing would give me more pleasure. My dear fellow, if you buck up, I could put it on as soon as I finish this thing that Gale's so fond of."

He turned to study his face in the mirror above the washbasin, putting his index fingers to his cheekbones and stroking back the skin. "It's no use fooling ourselves, is it? We're middle-aged. I could never really be your Wainewright again, could I? I've grown too old. . . .

"Too old," he repeated, moving away, and then said with characteristic abruptness: "Good night, my dear Paul, pleasant dreams."

At the beginning of October, when I was still in America, the *New York Times* carried a brief dispatch from London about the reception of *Stranger and Stranger*. The critics had praised Charley's performance but condemned the play. I was surprised to see no mention of Peggy Robinson.

The explanation came in a letter from Yvonne shortly afterwards. This had been written a fortnight or so before the first night and read in part:

Well, we're in a nice mess, and for once it isn't *entirely* Charley's fault. At least I'm sure you'll say it isn't.

When we were all ready to start rehearsals, that b—— Peggy returned her contract to Lampson (our business manager) unsigned, and calmly announced she'd accepted another engagement! I could hardly believe my ears when Lampson told me. It had been absolutely understood between us — Peggy and me — that she would do the part and the *possibility* that she might go back on her word had just never entered my head. Of course, with nothing in writing, I couldn't hold her to her agreement. Eventually I got the truth out of her. Some kind friend had told her about that awful night, repeating practically word for word what Charley had said when he was drunk, and she'd promptly decided she'd rather not act with him again. Well, you can't exactly blame her, and that ass Pirbright must curse the hour he started spreading the story. But I do think she might have had the decency to come straight to me, don't you, instead of waiting until we'd made all our arrangements?

Naturally, *Charley* wasn't in the least upset and he said not to worry as he knew of *the* actress for the part who, by a "miracle" or something, happened to be free. Her name was Kitty Lane. He assured me that she was wonderful and famous, etc. etc. and that you'd always said she was a genius. (Had you?!!) Anyway, like a fool I told Lampson to engage the woman.

Well, it turns out that she hasn't done a thing since the war.

She's only trying to get back to the stage now because her husband has left her or died — I don't know which. I've found out since that she was in your Wainewright play (how's it going, by the way?) with Charley, which, Heaven knows, is donkey's years ago. She may have been a "genius" once, but she isn't any longer. She's frightful, and the only reason Charley thought of her for the part was because she'd just written him a more or less begging letter. I suppose he felt sorry for her. I shouldn't be surprised to hear that she's one of his ex-mistresses. Is she, do you happen to know?

Not that it would make any difference now, because we're landed with her. Meanwhile, rehearsals have begun in an atmosphere of doom. Charley, of course, is sublimely indifferent, as usual, to the mess he's made of things, and this Kitty Lane is at least eager. I'll say that for her, though God knows she ought to be. We're paying her a fantastic salary on Charley's recommendation. Eighty quid per week — the same as Peggy would have got. But Oliver Cranwood (the youth whom we finally engaged to produce) seems practically in despair with such a dud for a leading lady. Pirbright makes "scenes" on the average of one an hour. Cranwood wastes endless time trying to comfort the silly little man, instead of telling him to shut up or clear out. Of course, they're two of a kind. I can't stick these pansies.

I must admit, though, that the advance isn't at all bad. In fact, Lampson says it's remarkable. Charley doing a play under his own management has created a lot of interest, and the good will's *there* if we take advantage of it. I'm still hoping for the best. But I shall be surprised if we do better than break even on this first production of ours.

They did a great deal worse than that. Nobody wanted to see *Stranger and Stranger* after its adverse press, and the "remarkable" advance booking was swiftly followed by a remarkable number of cancellations. Yvonne had to choose, while another production was being prepared, between keeping *Stranger and Stranger* on, at a heavy loss, or closing the theater down — and that she wouldn't do.

She hadn't another new play up her sleeve, and there was no time to look for one. A revival was accordingly the only way out of her dilemma. She went methodically through the list of Charley's former successes and made her choice. Within a week of the opening of *Stranger and Stranger*, she had completed plans for a revival of *The Brighton Way*.

This, too, was destined to fail, for Yvonne had fallen into the error, as many more-experienced impresarios have done, of not realizing that the so-called commercial play, even though it may at first succeed, will be most unlikely to succeed again. Such plays may appeal vastly in their own time, but a generation later are as incapable of arousing interest as yesterday's newspaper. It was thus with *The Brighton Way*.

On my return to London in mid-November, the revival was in its third week, and business had already started to decline alarmingly. I went to the Saturday matinee and, though the house seemed quite good, there were many among the audience whose faces looked suspiciously familiar and who in the intervals either sat stolidly or wandered around with a faintly knowing and proprietary air. "Paper, my dear fellow," Charley told me afterwards. "Reams and reams of it. I fancy that almost every out-of-work actor and hospital nurse in London was in front."

He spoke smilingly. He didn't appear in the least bitter or worried. We were by ourselves in the sort of drawing room immediately off his dressing room, where he was required to rest between matinee and evening performances.

"Here, my dear," he said, turning to the tray which his dresser had just put beside him. "Let me give you some tea. Yvonne will be along shortly. At the moment she's looking at the returns."

"Thanks," I said, getting up to take the cup which he held out to me.

"Yes, my managerial career has hardly been brilliant so far," he resumed. "But I'm not giving up, Paul. The best of us make mistakes, don't we, and if one starts off with a couple of misses, as your

American friends would say, in the theater that's not incompetence, but just the luck of the toss. Just the luck of the toss," he said, stirring his tea. "You heard I dug up poor Kitty to play in *Stranger and Stranger*? Kitty Lane."

"Yes."

"The old thing was a bit rusty, I'm afraid, though perhaps she might have done better with a more experienced producer. She always did need a lot of coaching, didn't she? You remember what marvels Angus worked with her."

"I do, indeed."

A look of extreme tenderness came into his eyes. "It must be a heartbreaking business trying to come back when you're forgotten."

I murmured something appropriate.

"Another cup of tea, my dear?" I shook my head. He finished his own cup, and then refilled it.

"I made a real bloomer taking this ancient piece of machinery out of its covers, didn't I? The critics were right to say it creaks."

I thought it admirable — a flash of the gallantry in him — that he should assume responsibility for Yvonne's errors of judgment instead of blaming her. Perhaps, there was an element of pride in it also. Perhaps, it was his way of pretending that he was his own master.

"Anyhow, my dear Paul, it's fortunate you've come back to rescue me. I haven't asked you yet how our Wainewright's faring?"

"He isn't."

"What?"

"The play came off after a couple of weeks."

"Good God!" He seemed sincerely indignant. "They must really be barbarians over there. Well, we'll have to show them with this new play of yours, won't we? I'll produce it on Broadway myself."

"Give me a chance," I laughed. "I haven't had a moment to do any writing since I went away."

"Oh." His face fell.

"But I've found something else you might like!"

"What?" he asked without interest.

"A first play by a young American writer. My agent gave it to me to read. I think it's a remarkable piece of work. I know it would be a wonderful part for you."

"Really?"

"It's Bonnie Prince Charlie —"

"Bonnie Prince Charlie! You mean to say an American's written a play about Bonnie Prince Charlie! What confounded cheek!"

"An Irishman wrote a play about Saint Joan not so long ago," I replied a trifle impatiently.

"Yes, but —" he started, blustering, and then smiled and stroked his hair. "I should know better than to try arguing with my old friend Paul, shouldn't I? Have you got the play with you?"

"Well, as a matter of fact —" But I was spared the embarrassment of telling him that Yvonne had already snatched it from me, for at that moment she walked in.

"Have you saved any tea for me?" she asked Charley.

"Thanks," she said as I passed her a cup. "Have you told Charley about the play?"

"We were just talking about it," I said.

"Good." She sat down, and said to Charley, "Well, doesn't it sound like the very thing we've been looking for?"

"Perhaps." He uncrossed his legs. "But I'm not entirely certain I'd be right for the part. Charley's my name admittedly. But surely I'm rather too far gone in years to be called 'Bonnie.'"

"Oh, the play doesn't deal with the '45," I explained. "It takes place a decade or so afterwards, when —"

"Ah, I see," he said, as though he had feared as much. "Charles Edward Stuart in his latter days." He got up, and moved to the other end of the room. "The epitome of failure, wasn't he, Paul? A wreck of a man, completely debauched, with only one loyal follower left — his mistress — what was her name? Clementina something — driven from pillar to post, drunk and disorderly in every capital in Europe." He almost shivered. "Frankly, I'd be frightened of it."

"Why on earth should you be?" Yvonne said. "I thought you had such faith in Paul's judgment."

"Oh, I have; but —" He passed a hand over his face. "If Paul says it's a fine play, I'm sure it is. But will the public want to see it? Audiences usually dislike being harrowed, and this play must be extraordinarily harrowing." He appealed to me with a near frantic expression in his eyes. "You understand what I mean, Paul?"

I did, and I knew that he had not said it, for this talk of what the public would or would not take to was quite unlike him and rang false. His fear of the play, or rather of its subject matter was, I realized, a purely personal reaction. He had conjured up a mental picture of the declining Charles Edward Stuart and had seen his own reflection. He was shrinking from the idea of confessing publicly what he dreaded he might himself become.

"Well, anyway," Yvonne said, "there's no point in arguing until we've read the thing."

"That's right," I agreed, addressing Charley. "Read it, and see what you think."

Yvonne rang me up from the theater next evening. "Well, Paul, we've decided to do it."

"The play?"

"I agree with you — absolutely. It's wonderful. You'd never find a better part for Charley, would you? I mean *it is* him in a way."

"Does he really want to do it?"

"Yes, as far as I can tell, he does. Anyway, he hasn't a better suggestion. As per usual, he hasn't got a suggestion of any kind. We obviously can't afford to sit tight."

"When do you propose to start rehearsing?"

"As soon as we can get a producer and a cast together. Of course, we're taking quite a big risk, but it's really our only chance of surviving. It will be an expensive show to put on, I imagine, and if it fails we really will be in the soup. On the other hand, it *ought* to make back what we've lost. And that's a pretty penny — nearly

five thousand pounds, though keep that strictly to yourself, please." She was talking in a rather hysterical fashion, and I realized she was more worried than she cared to admit. "I do think this ought to succeed, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Of course, you do." She gave a sharp, nervous laugh. "Otherwise you wouldn't have suggested the thing."

I was kept busy during the next few weeks with a production of my own; a new operetta. Operetta had been my main contribution to the theater since the war. This was my sixth, and, as in the case of the others, Algernon Hart had written the music. Thus I got no chance to look in at one of the rehearsals of *The Lost Prince*, though Yvonne invited me to.

The first night was announced to take place about a week after my own. It so happened that one of my dress rehearsals went extremely badly, and it was nearly six A.M. when Algernon and I finally got away. As we wandered wearily along the Strand, we decided to stop in at the Anglia Restaurant for some breakfast.

I had often been in this gargantuan "popular" cafe at three or four o'clock in the morning, but never as late as six. Six, I had supposed, was a witching hour when the nocturnal revelers would have departed and the work-a-day customers from suburbia would not yet have arrived. I expected it to be practically deserted. We found it, on the contrary, quite full — but with a clientele drawn almost exclusively, so it seemed, from the criminal classes.

"Would you ever have dared to hope for such an atmosphere of romantic wickedness at Anglia of all places?" said Algernon, as he began a round-the-room survey of the sinister and garish-looking crowd. "Good God," he exclaimed suddenly. "Do you see who's over there?"

He pointed to a table in the far corner, and I saw Charley. He was sitting or — more descriptively — was propped up (for he had the appearance of being half dead) with a couple of prostitutes and a man who, to judge from his sunless face and appallingly flashy

suit, might have been a professional pimp. Charley was unshaven and, from a quick glimpse at him, I had the impression of something peculiar about his clothes. They weren't unkempt exactly, but they seemed to be cheap and common.

"On the loose again, I suppose," Algernon murmured as he turned his attention to the menu.

"Yes — and at the very worst moment for everyone concerned." I felt shocked and disgusted. I should have liked to leave at once, but Algernon was evidently fascinated. While I swallowed down my breakfast, he dawdled over his and kept glancing round for another look at Charley and his companions.

"Come on," I said, when he had at last finished and the bill was on the table. "Let's get out of here."

"Don't you think it would be fun to wait for *them*?"

"No, I don't."

"I'd like to see where they go."

"What on earth for? You're not suggesting we should follow them, are you?" I spoke irritably.

He laughed. "You know, Paul, as a student of psychology — you shock me. Here you have your first real glimpse of what we might describe as Charles Stranleigh's other life, and all you want to do is to run away."

"I've seen enough," I said, getting up.

Algernon remained seated. "Come on," I urged.

"I'll meet you outside in a few minutes. I'm going over to speak to them."

"You can't do that."

"Why not? You have no sense of adventure, Paul. You're a born Puritan."

I couldn't stand there arguing, and I left him.

"Well?" I said when he rejoined me, interested in spite of myself.

He looked a little sheepish, even guilt-stricken.

"Not as rewarding as I'd hoped."

I followed him through the revolving door into the street. He hailed a passing taxi, and we got in.

"Charley refused to recognize me," he resumed. "He said in a cockney voice that his name was Bert Something. What's more his friends seemed to think that he *was* Bert Something, so I'm afraid it may have been a bit indiscreet of me —"

"That's putting it mildly," I said.

"Oh, I don't think I gave him away. I'm sure the name of Charles Stranleigh wouldn't ring a bell with those people. I don't imagine they're Shakespearean scholars. . . ."

"I take it you beat a hasty retreat."

"Yes, though the younger of the two whores asked me to sit down and join the party, and the pimp backed her up. Perhaps they smelled custom. The pimp's a very unpleasant character, I'd say. But the other whore — the dark-haired one — she was having none of it. She obviously realized that Charley found me an unwelcome intruder, and she was all out to protect him. I liked her for that."

He warmed to the subject, evidently finding in it an excuse for what he knew he shouldn't have done. "Her attitude was extraordinarily possessive; almost maternal. You know, she must be getting on for forty — she's no chicken anyhow. I've a shrewd idea there's something quite out of the ordinary in Charley's relationship with her. Vulgar as she was, and half seas over as I imagine he was, they reminded me somehow of Francis Thompson and his streetwalker."

"Did they indeed?" I said with a yawn, though a suspicion crossed my mind that for once his love of romanticization might have brought him near the truth. I couldn't admit this to him, however, without betraying another's confidence.

He made a footstool of the tip-up seat opposite him. "After all," he said, "every man who runs away is looking for sympathy — and Charley's no exception. Even a faded whore may have more compassion in her than that wife of his."

I fully expected an SOS from Yvonne later during the day, but she was silent, and when I got a telegram signed both by her and Charley on my first night I presumed he was back with her. Next morning, I read in the papers that the opening of *The Lost Prince* was to be postponed for a fortnight: until after Christmas. I rang her up then on the pretext of thanking her for the telegram.

Her manner was even brisker and more artificial than usual. Anyone else might have imagined that she was merely busy, but I guessed that she was near the breaking point.

"It's such a complicated production," she said, explaining the postponement. "Besides, I don't think it would have been at all a bright idea to produce so soon before Christmas. People are too busy shopping then to be interested in the theater."

"How's Charley?"

"Perfectly all right. Why shouldn't he be?"

"I only wondered."

There was an awkward pause. I presumed this was an occasion when she could not bear to confide in anyone.

"When may I come to a rehearsal?" I asked.

"Oh, well, I doubt if you'd be able to get much idea of things at this stage. Wait till the dress rehearsal."

But the dress rehearsal came when I was still out of town for the Christmas holiday, and I got back only in time for the first night. By then, there were rumors current of what might be in store. My agent, for example, told me that the young author, having arrived buoyantly from America a few weeks earlier, had since decided against attending his own opening and had returned home convinced that his play was going to be butchered.

Even so, I was not prepared for the appalling thing that happened. As I was to hear in due course, Charley had begun rehearsals in a sullen, distraught, rebellious mood. Then he had walked out one day, after a minor tiff with Franklyn Roche, the producer, and was gone for a whole week. Yvonne waited until his usual prodigal's return before announcing the fortnight's postponement,

and thereafter managed to keep his nose formally to the grindstone. Right up until the final dress rehearsal, though, he was still reading his lines and at the final dress rehearsal itself he floundered hopelessly.

Yet Yvonne would not agree to a further postponement. Both Roche and Lampson pled with her in vain. She told them that they could not go on postponing indefinitely without arousing suspicion. Moreover (she said truthfully), Charley had assured her that he would "get through" all right, and she was ready to believe him.

Thus he put himself in the position of having to embrace fatality: to play a part in public without knowing a line of it. It was by all odds the most painful experience in the theater I ever endured. I could smell the fumes of impending calamity from the moment the curtain rose, for the actors on stage at the beginning were "fluffy" and palpably nervous.

There was an audible gasp of admiration when Charley appeared, and a prolonged burst of applause. Maybe the nonprofessionals in the audience imagined that here the master was arrived to give point and spice to what had so far seemed a plodding play. He looked magnificent in his white wig and immaculate eighteenth-century riding costume. But he looked, as I realized at once to my horror, exactly as he should not have done. Instead of accentuating the lines in his face, he had evidently been at pains to paint them out. He was no debauched and prematurely aged Charles Edward, but as nearly a representation of the bonnie Prince as he could make himself.

The applause ceased, and he lifted his head, which he had bowed in acknowledgment of his reception. For five or six seconds, perhaps, though it seemed much longer, he stood motionless. At last, he opened his mouth, but no words came. Then the prompter's voice, which twice had already whispered to no avail, was clearly heard throughout the auditorium.

Or rather the voice of one of the prompters was heard. For there were several. There was a prompter on the O. P. side as well as

the usual one in the prompt corner. And there was a prompter concealed under a table and a second crouched behind a settee and a third in another suitable hiding place on the stage itself. This amount of precaution at least had been taken in Charley's behalf.

But it didn't help him much. Often he failed to hear the prompts — though in time they grew so loud that the audience could have shouted them back at him. For the most part, he was forced to rely on his own halting invention. He staggered about the stage, mumbling between interminable pauses incoherent, more or less meaningless sentences.

The curtain came down on the first act to perfunctory clapping. I noticed a general reticence during the interval, born no doubt of pure dismay. I saw people exchange meaningful glances, but they seemed reluctant to say anything. I supposed they had an idea that things couldn't possibly go on as badly as they had begun, that it was too soon to speak, therefore, of the incredible exhibition Charley had made of himself. If this was, indeed, their view, I did not share it. My nerve had gone.

He got worse — if possible. When the next interval came, quite a lot of people decided to leave the theater. Others, however, thought it worth while to see how the agony would end, and among them comment was no longer withheld and comment was devastating. "You can't help feeling sorry for the chap. It must be awful for him." "And for the rest of the cast." "Of course, he'll never live it down." "No, this is the finish of him." "Can't he learn lines? Or didn't he bother?" "If you ask me, the fellow's blind drunk."

Yet there was no booing at the end, and this, I thought, was a tribute to the memory of what he once had been, of the pleasure he had once been able to give. The audience applauded politely and then filed out of the theater, as though they were leaving a funeral. Behind the scenes the atmosphere was like that in the house of mourning. When I dragged myself to the stage door, I saw none of the usual invaders storming it, and its keeper informed me, speaking in the hushed tones of a professional undertaker, that none would

be admitted anyway to the star's dressing room. Charley had given strict instructions that he was to be left alone.

Of course, I felt relieved. There was little or no comfort I could have offered him.

The telephone by my bed was ringing. It must have been about three o'clock in the morning.

"Paul, old cock!"

I croaked an acknowledgment.

"Paul, old fellow-my-lad!"

"Yes."

"Is that you, Paul?"

"Yes."

"Is that you, old fellow-my-lad?"

"Yes, it's me. What do you want?"

"You don't sound very pleased to hear from me."

"I was asleep. You woke me up. Where are you, Charley?" There was a background of voices and a tinkling piano.

"Where am I, old cock?"

"Yes."

"Where you and none of your bleeding friends can find me."

He continued after a pause, "I want you to tell my bitch of a wife that I'm not giving up. I, Charles Stranleigh, hereby declare that I will never give up. If she wants to close the theater — let her. I wouldn't stay in London any road. The press will flay me alive. Flay me alive, old cock, that's what they'll do. But I'll go to America. Hundreds of offers from America. Wish I was at liberty to accept them. What was I saying —"

"You won't give up."

"That's right. I won't give up. Be a good chap and tell Yvonne that, will you? I'm not going to let the cast down. They've worked wonderfully well."

"Why don't you go home and tell Yvonne yourself?" I said.

"Home?" He suddenly began shouting — so loudly that I had to

put the receiver from my ear. "I have no home. She's left me. Forced me to make a spectacle of myself — and then left me. Dropped me like a hot iron."

"I'm sorry."

"You're not. You're not the muckingest bit sorry. You advised her to leave me. Encouraged her."

"I did nothing of the kind," I protested, even though I was aware of the folly of arguing with him.

"You gave her the pretext, any road. You and that confederate of yours. You had me unmasked."

"What confederate? What on earth are you talking about?"

"Your distinguished collaborator, Algernon Hart. I saw the two of you conspiring together. If it hadn't been for him not minding his own bloody business —"

"Charley," I interrupted pleadingly. I was beginning to get a glimmer of what must have happened. "Charley, I'd like to talk to you. Why don't you come along here?"

"To stay, old chap?"

"Yes, certainly, if you'd care to."

"No. I'm most deeply obliged for your invitation. But I regret I must — decline it. I must decline it, old cock. Good night."

"But, Charley, I might be able to straighten things out for you. At any rate, I'd like to be of help, if I can." Though I was sure Yvonne must have every right on her side, it seemed to me that she could not have chosen an unkindler moment to leave him. "Tell me —"

"She'll tell you. She tells you of all my sins and shortcomings, doesn't she? She'll tell you right enough. With knobs on."

"I was going to say tell me how I can be of help."

"How can you be of help?"

"Yes."

"By keeping away from me, old darling," he said mildly, and then began to shout again. "Aye, and by keeping your bloody confederates away from me, too. You thought I was a Charles Edward

Stuart. You made me play that degrading part, you forced me into it — you and her between you. Well, now I'm going to be a Charles Edward Stuart for you. Not in London, mind you. In the provinces where I belong. I'm going to be Charles Edward Stuart all over the mucking country. And I don't want to see you again, old cock. Put that in your pipe and smoke it!" He waited for a second or two, evidently expecting some reply, and then rang off.

I dreaded to think what would become of him now, with Yvonne gone and after last night's prodigious catastrophe. But I felt certain at least that within a few days I, as well as anyone else whom he may have insulted, would receive the customary apology.

But this time no apology came, and over a year passed before I saw him again.

CHAPTER XXII

YVONNE cut her losses as resolutely as she had allowed them to accrue, and in the end was left a poorer but by no means poverty-stricken woman. I got no chance of talking to her at length for a month or so after the break, for her time was fully occupied winding up Charley's play-producing company, getting rid of the Macready Theater (she had to buy her way out of the lease), getting rid of the house in Oxfordshire and getting Gerald back to school. She then moved into a suite at the Savoy Hotel, and I went to call on her there one Monday evening before dinner. On this same evening, as I knew, Charley was due to begin his tour of *The Lost Prince* in Manchester. Amazingly, to me, he had fulfilled his drunken boast.

She opened the polished walnut door to admit me, and I was surprised by her appearance. She looked unusually smart, and younger than she had for several years.

"Go along in," she said, indicating the sitting room. "You'll have a cocktail, won't you, Paul? It will do you good." She pressed the bell button. "You've no idea what a relief it is after all these years to be able to offer a friend a drink quite openly — without having to think 'Is he anywhere near?'"

"Have you heard from him at all since — ?"

"No," she said firmly, "I haven't."

"Neither have I."

She sat down, and commanded me to do likewise, pointing to the massive armchair by the window.

"I'm looking for a small house or flat in town," she said with

studied brightness. "Actually, I shall be spending quite a lot of my time in Knutsford, because I intend to take a much more active part in running my business from now on. But I can't leave London altogether. I have too many ties here. Besides, Gerald will be going to Harrow in a couple of years, and I don't want the poor boy to feel his home's miles away."

A waiter came in and she ordered sidecars. "I hope they're what you like," she said.

She continued chatting about her own plans until I took advantage of a lull to ask her if she knew about Charley's tour of *The Lost Prince*. "I shouldn't imagine it would last long," I added.

"The tour? Of course, it won't. Who on earth will want to see *The Lost Prince*, begging your pardon, my dear, after its record-breaking run of one night in London? And with the star still not knowing one line of his part, presumably? Oh well, it isn't my business any more what he does. Thank God."

The waiter wheeled in a trolley with glasses and cocktail shaker on it, and she asked me to do the pouring out.

"You know," I said, "you're being rather hard on Charley."

"Hard on him!"

"Well, perhaps that's a bad way of putting it. You see, I was surprised to hear you'd left him — I suppose because you'd threatened to do so often before and never had."

She lifted her left hand, and glanced at the outspread fingers. I noticed she was still wearing her wedding ring. "It's the only way, Paul. If I let myself worry about his future — or his present — I'd probably end up by going back to him. That would be worse than useless. I couldn't have gone on with him."

"Not simply because of the debacle?"

"No." She took a sip of her drink. "It's an extremely sordid story. Still, if you think I'm being hard on Charley, perhaps you'd better hear it." She put the glass down on the table beside her, and lit a cigarette. "You remember how I found him with a prostitute years ago?"

"I do, indeed."

"Well, I can tell you the woman's name now. It's Rosa Bremmer. Apparently, she occupied a more lasting place in that great, capacious heart of his than any one of the others. I'm still not sure when he first picked her up, but a couple of months or so after he'd brought her to the house — or rather she'd brought him — she waylaid him. She was waiting outside the stage door, and he promised to meet her at some teashop next day. At that time, if you remember, he was supposed to be behaving himself. As far as I know he did more or less keep off the bottle for about a year on end."

"When did you discover all this?"

She looked at me as though she would have preferred some suitable expression of horror and had at least expected one of amazement.

"Oh, I'll come to that later," she said. "This is just the prologue. And, incredible though it may sound, I can assure you it's perfectly true." She inhaled a long puff of her cigarette. Her eyes were cold, and I realized that she was trying to speak as unemotionally as possible. "Rosa told Charley that she was pregnant. She swore that he was the father. Can you imagine any man being such a fool as to fall for a thing like that? To believe that a prostitute could possibly know who was the father? But Charley did. He assumed full responsibility for his chee-ild, etc. You can imagine him saying it, can't you? What's more he made Rosa promise to 'reform.'" She laughed scornfully. "As a start, he set her up with a nursemaid in a nice little house in Clapham. All much more comfortable from Rosa's point of view than an abortion. As for Charley, perhaps he imagined this suburban nook would be a real home from home or something."

"Suburban nook?" I said, the expression striking a distant chord in my memory. It was the expression Renee had used so long ago to describe the sort of home Charley would make for Jean. "Why do you think he wanted that?"

She made an impatient gesture, and took another sip of her drink.

I felt that she was troubled by a vague suspicion that this part of the story was not really as black as she wished to paint it. "Well, I suppose even he must have had more sense than to try keeping Rosa and her bastard daughter in the heart of London!"

"A daughter?" I exclaimed.

"Yes." She crushed out her cigarette. "That was one of the many 'dreams of his life,' wasn't it, to have a daughter? Well, a tart managed to convince him he'd got one."

"Where is she now?"

"Who? Rosa?"

"No. The girl. The daughter."

"Dead."

The way she said this — as a casual statement of fact — jarred on me. Without doubt, I reflected, this was one of those episodes in Charley's life for which he deserved no pity by accepted moral standards. Yet I was sure the child's death must have caused him genuine grief.

"Oh, for Heaven's sake, Paul," she snapped, making me lift my eyes. "There's no need to make a great tragedy out of it. The girl died when she was less than a year old — of neglect, I should say. Anyhow, Rosa soon got fed up with living respectably in Clapham. It wasn't her idea of fun at all to be the wife of Bert Taylor, a commercial traveler, who was only able to spend a few hours a month at home. Oh yes, Charley meant to do the thing properly; lead a real double life — with false identity and all. Rosa never gave him away to her friends and colleagues — and, as you can imagine, they weren't theatergoers — at least not the type of theatergoers who'd have recognized Charley."

"Well, that's something in her favor."

"Nonsense. She wasn't tempted to give him away. In fact, the reverse. Because Charley agreed to go on supporting her even after the child was dead and she'd finally moved back to her old hunting ground. He said he owed her this; he said what had happened was all his fault. If only he'd been free to spend more time with her in

Clapham she'd have gone on living there quite happily — a permanently reformed character — and the child wouldn't have died. That was just his excuse, of course. Actually, the new agreement was ideal for both of them. Rosa had all the excitement of her profession she wanted without having to work at it too hard. She could be choosy. And Charley secured the entree into her circle of pimps and prostitutes and the rest of them. They were the sort of people he really liked — always had liked. He could get as drunk with them and behave as disgustingly as he pleased. Because with them, remember, he wasn't Charles Stranleigh, famous actor; he was Bert Taylor, Rosa's tame bloke. He even used to dress the part, and I suppose that's partly the reason he managed to escape discovery for so long. They must have thought him a pretty big idiot. They put up with him because he had plenty in his pocket and didn't mind getting rid of it. Most of his money that mysteriously vanished must have gone on Rosa and her crowd."

She got up to help herself to another cocktail. "Have some more of this poison?"

"Thanks," I said, going to her.

"And so it went merrily on," she said. "Year after year. Until I suddenly threw a spanner in the works by taking charge of all his funds. After that, he wasn't in a position to support his pet tart any longer."

"But she still stuck to him?" I said, with a hint of eagerness.

"She hung on — yes." We were facing one another. "I don't know what sort of story he told her, but presumably she hoped he'd be able to lay his hands on some money again soon. She was having to work in earnest meanwhile — and she was getting a bit old for her trade."

"She might have blackmailed him." I cocked my head.

"Certainly."

"And she didn't."

"*She* didn't — no. At least, that's his version."

"Interesting," I said, moving away.

"My dear Paul," she laughed irritably. "What on earth are you getting at? Are you trying to sentimentalize this disgusting business? Do you want to excuse Charley and turn Rosa into a nice woman or something?"

I smiled at her soothingly over my glass. "Not quite that. But even a hardened prostitute might not have been entirely proof against Charley's charm."

"That charm!" she exclaimed. "It was all a sham." She sauntered back to her chair.

"Maybe. But it usually worked."

"Oh, I grant you that," she said tersely. "When he wanted it to. Anyway, it doesn't make the faintest difference now whether he got round her or not. As you'll see."

She proceeded to tell me about the rehearsals of *The Lost Prince* and of how Charley had disappeared for a week in the middle of them. He had been with Rosa, as she was to find out later.

"When he came crawling back," she said, "I was ready to chuck him then and there. But there was a lot at stake, and, of course, he promised faithfully that he'd get down to the job of learning his lines and urged me to consider the rest of the company and so on — and, like the fool I'd always been, I believed him. Just a few days before we opened, when I made a last attempt to get him to behave, he came out with the truth. He couldn't concentrate on his work, he said, because he was being threatened by someone and was worried sick. Then he told me the story. Everything I've told you. He'd never in his life treated me to so much honesty. But the fact was he'd landed himself in such a mess he needed my help, and needed it in a hurry. You see, one of Rosa's men friends had found out who he was." She leaned forward. The smoke from her cigarette was curling over her shoulder. "And —"

"Did he tell how?" I said softly.

"No."

"I can." I described Algernon's encounter with Charley at Anglia.

"Oh, I thought something like that must have happened," she

said, clearly impatient with the interruption. "It was bound to sooner or later. Obviously."

She got up, and moved about restlessly for a bit. "Of course," she resumed, "he professed deep shame and so on. The usual stuff. It was the same old trick he'd been playing for years; you know, dumping his conscience on my lap and then expecting me to return it to him after a good spring clean. This time I couldn't, Paul. I just could not. I'd about reached the end of my tether. I told him he'd better go ahead with learning his part -- and I'd take care of this fellow who was blackmailing him. I said we'd discuss the future after the first night was out of the way."

She shrugged her shoulders. "It wasn't good enough for him, I suppose. After the dress rehearsal, which was a complete and utter fiasco, he turned round and blamed me. He said it was my cold and reproachful attitude which was upsetting him. My cold and reproachful attitude, I ask you! What did he expect -- sweetness and light? But, of course, he still couldn't resist being contrary. He swore he'd know his lines in time for the show if it killed him! He said he wanted to 'show me.' Well, he certainly did, didn't he?"

"Yes," I murmured, twiddling my glass by the stem.

She sat down again. She had been allowing some of the latent bitterness in her to come to the surface. Now she renewed her effort to speak impersonally. "I drove up to town early next morning, leaving Charley at home with a damp towel wrapped round his head. Allegedly, he was working. He may have guessed I was going to meet Francis, but I didn't tell him."

"Who's Francis?"

"Rosa's man friend. Roland Francis. Doesn't sound like the name of a blackmailer, does it?"

"Why didn't you tell Charley you were meeting him?"

"Because it would have given him an excuse to get into another mood. He disliked the idea of my dealing with the man direct. Anyway, he'd asked me to give him the money so that he could pass it

on. Of course, I couldn't have trusted him with it. Besides, I wished to talk to this Mr. Francis myself. I thought I'd better get at the whole truth."

She sat back and closed her eyes.

"I hope I never have to live through another hour like that," she said. "Francis had sent Charley a letter threatening in a veiled way to 'report him' and suggesting they should meet to 'discuss the matter.' I didn't understand what he meant by 'reporting' him. Anyhow, I answered the letter. I asked Francis to come and see me at the theater."

Again she paused, closing her eyes.

"He was intolerably offensive. He wouldn't utter a syllable until he'd made sure I hadn't got a lot of plainclothes detectives listening in at the keyhole or something. And then he took his time. He had a horrible accent, Paul — Oxford superimposed on Limehouse. He was revolting — revolting. He kept calling me 'Mrs.,' and he kept saying how much he admired my loyalty to my husband 'and all that,' but 'business was business, doncha' know, and we all had to pay for our little mistakes, doncha' know.' I could have hit him. Oh, I won't repeat everything he said — I can't remember all of it, anyhow. The point was that Charley had been accepting money from Rosa and free board and lodging and getting drunk at her expense — living on her, in fact, instead of supporting her — and that wouldn't do now, would it? He'd say for Charley that he'd 'boxed clever,' pretending to be a harmless mug who'd lost his job and playing on poor Rosa's better nature. But he hadn't boxed quite clever enough, had he? He'd been found out, and now he'd have to be a 'sport' and pay his losses. It was very unfortunate, of course, and all that, but the police would have to be informed unless —"

"The police!" I sat upright.

"Yes, Paul," she said, speaking as herself again. "The police. He would go to the police if I didn't buy him off." She shivered suddenly. "There's an awful draught coming from somewhere. Be a lamb, and see if the window's open, will you?"

"Well, I hope you told him to go to the devil," I said, as I went to struggle with the heavy, brocaded curtains.

"That wouldn't have been very practical. After all, as he explained, it's a criminal offense to live on a woman's immoral earnings."

"Charley hadn't done that?" I glanced round at her sharply.

"Hadn't he? He'd stayed with her; he'd taken money from her."

"Surely, you don't imagine the police would have believed such a fantastic story?"

"Your nice loyal Rosa was prepared to give evidence against him. It would have been pretty damning."

"Yes. But you only had this pimp's word for that."

"Francis said she'd do whatever he told her. He said she wouldn't dare disobey him — and anyway she was going to get a share of the spoils."

"He was probably lying."

"Possibly. I didn't choose to take the risk."

I moved away from the window. "I've shut it," I said.

"Thanks. Now look at this." She went to the desk, and took out a canceled check from one of the drawers. She handed it to me. "My last memento of life with Charley."

I whistled when I saw the amount. "Three thousand pounds!"

"I got him down from five," she said with extraordinary complacency. "Oh, I wasn't considering only Charley when I paid it. I was considering myself — and Gerald. Do you think I wanted it to become public knowledge that while he was supposed to be married to me he was spending his spare time living with and off a tart?" She passed a hand over her eyes. She was blinking slightly.

"I suppose you realize," I said, turning away from her, "that this Mr. Francis or whatever his name is will almost certainly come back for more."

"If he does, I shall go straight to the police myself." Her voice rose almost to a squeak. "I shall charge him with blackmail, and I shall have this check as evidence. He knows that. He wanted me

to pay him in cash, but I wouldn't. I said it was a check or nothing — and when I signed it I knew that I'd done the last thing I'd ever do for Charley. In the future, he'll be able to behave as he likes — but he'll have to take the consequences." She put the check away, closing the drawer with a bang. "That's that."

She rose. "I ought to be getting dressed, Paul. I'm dining out."

"Well, I hope now that you're less busy you'll come and have dinner with *me* soon."

"I'd love to."

I took a step or two towards the door.

"Do you still think I'm being hard on Charley?" she said, stopping me.

"I think you were perfectly justified in leaving him," I smiled. "But then, I've been telling you that for years, haven't I?"

"I suppose people are saying I only chucked him because of *The Lost Prince*?"

"Not the people I have spoken to."

"It *wasn't* the reason, of course. But to be perfectly honest, Paul," she said, leading the way into the lobby, "I might still have changed my mind if he'd turned up trumps in the end and given something resembling a decent performance. And — even afterwards — disgusted though I was, I couldn't help feeling pity for him; he was *terribly* broken up, you know; and for once he hadn't been drinking."

She began helping me on with my coat. "I might easily have put off telling him I'd decided to leave him — until later. And — God knows — if I'd done that I might still be putting it off. Helping him over stiles was practically a lifetime habit with me, wasn't it, and I'd never seen him as lame as he was now. But, then, after I'd done my best to cheer him up, he suddenly took away every scrap of sympathy I had for him by trying to shift the blame. It wasn't his fault what had happened, he said. It was mine — and yours, incidentally. We'd forced him to do a play he'd never wanted to do. Well, that was the last straw; the absolute finish." She opened the door for me to go out. "So if *you've* been thinking it was cruel of me

to leave him at that particular moment I hope you understand now why I did it."

"Yes," I said. But I couldn't resist adding, for I was convinced it was the case, "Nevertheless, it's obvious, isn't it, that he really did object to acting that part? I'm sorry now I ever suggested it."

"Oh, you needn't be," she said. "After all, if he honestly disliked the thing, he wouldn't have gone and taken it on tour, would he?"

I couldn't think of an answer to that, though I was sure there must be one.

Later, I guessed the reason.

I had always thought him a childlike man, and in a sense his action now was akin to that of a child who protests against an unwelcome order by carrying it out in a grotesquely exaggerated fashion. To judge from the news that leaked back to London, his tour of *The Lost Prince* was something quite unique in the annals of the theater.

At the opening night in Manchester he more or less knew the author's lines — and spoke them; but he gave a truly horrifying performance. He ranted and bellowed and cut capers on the stage. He delivered an extraordinary curtain speech that was as embarrassing to his fellow players as it was utterly bewildering to his audience. He said that he believed in reincarnation and that he was sure the spirit of Bonnie Prince Charlie dwelt in his body. He said that he had been banished from London but that he knew the "good people" of Manchester — "his people" — would strive to send him back there in triumph. He said that in so doing they would avenge not only his honor but the memory of "The King over the water." "Last time," he concluded, "we halted at Derby. But this time — this time, my Lord Chancellor, my lords, ladies and gentlemen — we shall not pause until we reach the very heart of Shaftesbury Avenue. The fight is on! God bless you all!"

A supper had been arranged in his honor afterwards by some un-

suspecting local patrons of the drama. He turned up at this still in his stage costume and make-up; when the time came for him to respond to a toast, he insisted on being introduced as "His Royal Highness, Prince Charles." He then repeated his curtain speech — with elaborations — and finished it by raising his glass and bidding the assembled company drink to his "much beloved father, His Majesty, King James." Later, Prince Charles hurled several glasses on the floor, and eventually slipped to the floor himself, from where he had to be lifted and carried from the room.

Thus he set the pattern of his behavior throughout. Wherever he went, his eccentricities and intemperance became public knowledge. After a few nights, he had given up speaking above a fraction of the lines written by the author of *The Lost Prince*. He gagged and clowned unashamedly; quite often he gave vent to obscenities which, though they may well have been in character, would certainly not have been passed for public utterance by the Lord Chamberlain or any local Watch Committee.

At the end of six weeks — two in Manchester, two in Edinburgh and two in Glasgow — the money he had raised to finance the tour was nearly gone. He would have been forced to close down altogether if a certain Mr. Western F. Lardwell had not — unhappily — offered him a new deal.

There were at this time several classes of touring companies. They ranged from those that came out of the West End, as Charley's had, to the few surviving troupes of strolling players who still set up scene in village barns and public houses. About midway down the list were the companies that brought revues, musical comedies and — infrequently — straight plays to the so-called provincial music halls: large-sized theaters, situated in various outlying districts of London as well as in the main provincial towns, where the prices of seats were low and performances were given twice nightly. These companies existed quite independently of the West End stage; they had their own stars, managers, agents and so on; they also had their own public. In effect they represented a distinct stratum of the

theatrical profession in Britain. To this stratum Mr. Western F. Lardwell belonged. He was a manager.

As such he trafficked in vulgarity. It was his conviction that the more vulgar the show the more likely it would be to make money. Evidently, he decided that a once illustrious West End star, making a lurid spectacle of himself and a coarse charade of an intelligent play, might be just the sort of thing his public would flock to see. At any rate, when he heard that the already notorious tour of *The Lost Prince* was on its last legs, he went up to Glasgow and interviewed Charley. As a result of this meeting, so I read in the *Stage* a week or so after it had taken place, Charley was to reopen the play with a new company under Western F. Lardwell's auspices.

About a month later, the following playbill was reprinted in the *Stage*:

EMPIRE, Peckham

Week of May 12th, 1931

WESTERN F. LARDWELL SUPER-PRODUCTIONS

Have the honour to present
the world-renowned artiste

Mister CHARLES STRANLEIGH

In his SENSATIONALLY DARING West End TRIUMPH

THE LOST PRINCE

With an All-Star Supporting Cast of *your* favourites
A "Strong Meat" play for adults only. Keep the kiddies at home!

Twice Nightly: 6:40 and 8:40

It was, of course, a tremendous step downwards for Charley to accept employment from Western F. Lardwell and go on a tour of the provincial music halls. But he had fallen lower than that. He was allowing himself to be exploited as a kind of freak; he was being used to cater to the cheapest and most prurient of theater-going taste. It didn't matter to Mr. Lardwell how drunk Charley was when he appeared on the stage so long as he *did* appear and gave what amounted to a public exhibition of his own mental afflictions; an exhibition that was likely on occasion to be grossly indecent.

Yet he was doing this from choice. There were several managers who would have liked to give him a chance at a West End comeback. Hubert Langham was one of them, and when Charley appeared at the Kilburn Empire late in June he went to see him there.

"It's a tragedy," he told a group of us at the Garrick a few days afterwards. "Imagine having to watch Nijinski dance while he's still insane; that'll give you a rough idea of what this show of Charley's is like. It's a nauseating business; it oughtn't to be allowed. I suppose the audiences who crowd to see it hope they're going to be shocked, but at the performance I saw they were guying him most of the time, laughing *at* him, not *with* him. The whole thing struck me as an organized humiliation. Perhaps that's the real secret of its appeal. The great British public have always enjoyed an opportunity to humiliate an artist, haven't they?"

"I was at the first house, and I went round to see him between shows. He was slouched in a chair drinking brandy with the actor who's his brother in the play; anyone less suited to the part of the Cardinal, incidentally, it would be hard to visualize; but then, the whole cast's unbelievably awful. Charley was still being the Prince. He pretended not to recognize me when I came in; then he said that if I meant to tempt him back to the West End I was wasting my time as he'd decided to stay 'in exile.' I wanted to talk to him alone, of course, but when I hinted as much he said he

had no secrets from 'His Eminence.' He started getting abusive after a bit. For no apparent reason he worked himself up into a rage, and called me every unpleasant name he could think of. In the end, he more or less threw me out. I couldn't help being reminded of his first wife. You remember poor Renee? Renee Logan. I tried to help *her* get back on her feet years ago, and she was just as hopeless a case as he is now."

The tour grew into a country-wide scandal. Charley's outlandish behavior on the stage began to be attacked in the provincial press. Local authorities were forced to take official notice of it and seek ways and means to stop it. When the tour finally closed round the beginning of April, 1932, Charley had been twice arrested for causing a public nuisance by uttering obscenities on the stage, and he was lucky under the circumstances to have escaped imprisonment.

The tour closed in Southampton. I heard nothing of him during the next couple of months. The press ignored him. He might, so far as the general public was concerned, already have been a dead actor — dead and fast becoming forgotten.

In fact, as I should have guessed, he was still in Southampton. It was, after all, the logical thing for him to remain there. It would have been a mere waste of money for him to move, for he could carouse as well in Southampton as anywhere else. That was what he did do, until he reached a point beyond which his "madness," as he himself afterwards called it, could not drive him.

On Derby Day Yvonne rang me up. I was listening to the broadcast of the race.

"Paul," she said in a perfectly matter-of-fact way, "are you busy?"

"Well, you dragged me to the telephone just as I was hoping to learn I'd never have to work again. Don't you realize —"

"I'm sorry," she cut me short. "But this is important." She didn't sound upset; merely impatient. "Do you think you could possibly get away for a day or two?"

"When?"

"At once."

"Well, I was planning to go to Tintagel at the week end." I had recently bought a hideaway there. "I'm trying to finish a new play. Why? What is it?"

"It's Charley. The *Evening Standard's* just rung me up. He's in hospital. Critically ill."

I felt my heart thump. "Where is he?"

"At the Central Hospital in Southampton. He was taken there a couple of days ago. He'd been living in a low-class hotel; at least that's how the reporter man described it. He must be pretty well penniless. Anyhow he was stuck in a public ward. That's obviously why the press haven't got onto the story before now."

"Good God," I said.

"I don't like the idea of his being left entirely alone." There was a note of genuine concern in her voice. "There ought to be somebody on the spot in case — and you're his oldest friend."

"I quite agree. I'll go at once. But what about you?" She was still his wife in name. She hadn't taken any steps to divorce him. Doubtless he needed her more at this moment than he had ever done.

"No," she replied with complete firmness. "I don't want to go anywhere near that hospital unless I absolutely have to. If he is really dying and asks to see me, then I'll go to him, but not otherwise. You may think I'm being callous, Paul, but I know what would happen, once I started fussing round him again. There'd be no end to it. Frankly, it's as much for my own sake as his that I'm turning to you."

"Very well, my dear, if that's how you feel."

"You'll let me know as soon as you've any definite news, won't you?"

"Of course," I assured her.

I caught a late-afternoon train, and drove straight to the hospital. The Sister in charge gave me to understand that she was tired of being badgered for information about Mr. Stranleigh; inquiries had evidently been coming in all day. It was only after I had convinced

her that I was not another newspaper reporter that she agreed to send for the doctor. Presently, an alert-looking young man walked into the receiving room. He wore a white coat, and had a stethoscope dangling busily from his neck like a chain of office.

"Are you a relative?" he asked.

I explained who I was and why I had come.

"Well, I don't think I ought to let you see him yet. He's better off without visitors for the time being."

"What are the chances?"

"That's hard to say. He's holding his own. There's more than a hope he'll pull through."

"Has he been delirious?"

He nodded. He was evidently assured by this question that I realized the nature of Charley's illness and that, therefore, he had no obligation to conceal it from me. "In addition, he's suffering from a dropsical condition. Fortunately it's only in an incipient stage — otherwise there'd have been nothing we could have done for him. But it's meant we've had to cut him off alcohol completely — not by degrees which is the normal procedure. The result is he's under a particularly heavy strain and it's a question whether his heart can hold out."

I gave him the name of the hotel where I would be staying, and he promised to notify me immediately of any change. I also made arrangements with him to have Charley transferred to the private patients' wing as soon as possible, and undertook to bear the cost of this. After that, there was nothing to do except wait.

Two days later, I telephoned Yvonne that Charley was out of danger and had asked to see me.

"Are you *going* to see him?"

"Yes. The doctor thinks a short visit will do him good. He needs cheering up."

"I don't doubt that. But I shouldn't go if I were you. You've done enough. There's no reason why you should try and arrange his life

for him; and that's exactly what you'll be letting yourself in for if you go and see him now."

I knew that she was probably right. At the same time, I suspected that she wasn't offering me advice which she thought I could follow, but rather was attempting to ease her own conscience for having landed me in a situation from which there was now no escape.

"I'm afraid I'll have to take the risk," I said lightly. "I can't possibly leave at this point without seeing him."

"Well, I've warned you," she said.

The moment I saw him I knew her prediction was going to be fulfilled. He looked spectacularly helpless. He had the bedclothes pulled up to his chin. All he could manage by way of acknowledging my arrival was a slight twist of his neck and a painful suggestion of a smile. "You see, my dear old Paul," he said in a hoarse whisper, "you haven't got rid of me yet. I nearly kicked the bucket. But I'm going to be all right."

"Of course, you are, Charley," I said with empty brightness, and turned away.

I couldn't utter the false words of cheer with which I had come prepared. For the moment, I couldn't say anything. The only chair in the room was a folding one standing against the wall. I busied myself making a seat out of it, while I tried to recover from the initial shock of seeing his thick hair, now quite gray, falling streakily over his forehead, his blotched and swollen face, his hollow blood-streaked eyes, and only the mould of his head a faint reminder of his once miraculous beauty of appearance.

"Paul." I heard that hoarse whisper again. "Would you be a dear fellow, and run a small errand for me? It's rather urgent. Otherwise I wouldn't ask you."

"Why, certainly, Charley," I said. "What is it you want?"

"My belongings."

"Your belongings?" I shouldn't have imagined he had any left.

"Where are they?"

"In the pub where I was staying when I got ill." He spoke halt-

ingly. "If they're not collected soon, they'll be disposed of. I hate sending you there, Paul, because frankly it's not a very savory place. . . . But there's really nobody else I can ask. . . . I'm afraid you may be dunned for my — outstanding account. I'm not sure how much it is. Perhaps you wouldn't mind adding it to what I must owe you already for — all this." Obviously he meant the hospital bills. "I don't happen to have any money with me at the moment. . . . Naturally . . . I'll . . . repay you everything as soon as I'm on my feet again."

His head flopped back on the pillows, and he was silent.

"Would you like me to go at once?" I asked after a pause.

"I should be grateful." The words were barely audible.

"All right, then." I got up. "Where is this pub?"

He told me none too distinctly. I said I wouldn't have time to see him again that day — I was returning to London in the afternoon — but that I'd bring his bags to the hospital and leave them with the Sister in the receiving room. He thanked me, and hoped I'd be able to come and visit him again soon. "Perhaps I'll be feeling more like my old self again when you do," he said.

"You can't expect to get your strength back all at once," I muttered, conscious of the banality of the remark but feeling that I had to say something to hide the fact that I was thankful to be off. "These things take time."

"You ought to have been a doctor, Paul," he almost smiled. "You won't overlook anything, will you?" he added when I was at the door. "You ought to find a few books there among the rest of my stuff. They're not much. But I value them."

The "pub" where he had been staying was in the dock area. It didn't advertise itself as anything, and its entrance was simply a door from which the paint was peeling off badly. I had to ring long and persistently before a fat, blowzy-looking woman appeared, wearing carpet slippers and fingering her untidy hair.

"Yes," she said uncompromisingly.

I told her what my errand was. She wouldn't admit that there was such a person as Mr. Stranleigh until I had produced my wallet and paid her the better part of ten pounds. "First door to the right," she said, indicating the steep narrow staircase that faced me. "His room ain't been let yet."

It hadn't been touched, so far as I could see. The bed was unmade. A chamber pot filled with stale urine stood near the bed. The smell was unbearable, and I held my breath as much as I could while I set about packing up for him.

There was a pile of old newspapers stacked in a corner. I decided he could not expect me to salvage these. On the edge of the dressing table, within reach of the bed, was a half-empty bottle of brandy. For a moment it occurred to me that was what he must really be after. Then I thought it impossible that he could imagine I would lend myself to smuggling drink to him against the doctor's orders.

Yet the rest amounted to practically nothing. His wardrobe was so depleted that it left plenty of room to spare in the green and battered cloth-covered suitcase, which I discovered under the bed and which seemed to be the sum total of his baggage. I went diligently through all the drawers. Buried beneath dirty linen, and socks that wanted darning, I came across various oddments that reminded me of that flight of his back to Manchester long ago, when he had packed a lampshade among other things.

There were no books to be seen save for a few paper-backed thrillers and a volume of Shakespeare's plays. It was to this last, I presumed, that he must have been referring when he had called my particular attention to his "books" which he "valued." He surely couldn't mean the others. I wondered why he should value it, for it wasn't an edition of any great intrinsic worth. I wondered why he should have bothered to keep a volume of Shakespeare's plays by him during his long carousal. I scrutinized it quizzically. I'd an idea I'd seen it before in Charley's possession, though I could not recall when and where. Out of curiosity, I opened it and turned to the fly-

leaf. *To my beloved Charley, I read, to wish him well in his career, from Jean.*

For several seconds I stood motionless, staring at this message from the past, my mind overwhelmed with memories of that Sunday, nearly twenty-five years ago, when Jean had shown it to me. But then I became aware again of the repugnant smell in the room, and I only wanted to finish packing up as soon as possible. I put the book in the suitcase.

I had come to interpret his unbroken silence on the subject of Jean to mean that he'd forgotten her. Now my discovery that he had kept her *gage d'amour* through all the vicissitudes of his life since she died proved I had been mistaken. That was all it signified to me.

But I stopped far short of the whole truth. I should have realized that, consciously or unconsciously, he was in mourning, as it were, for that "suburban nook" he might have shared with Jean and for a way of living he'd forsaken by going on the stage. I should have understood that through my persuading Jean he must become an actor he had not only been assured fame, but had been condemned, inexorably, to a life of regret.

The evidence of this I discarded symbolically as I put the book in the suitcase. Though I had come across a key to his tragedy, I did not recognize it for what it was. Otherwise, I might have acted differently in the ensuing months, when I did with his life as I pleased or rather made of it what I could.

CHAPTER XXIII

THERE WAS NOT the slightest doubt in my mind that Charley must strive to retrieve himself as an artist. I assumed that that was his own aim, and for a while at any rate I had good reason to.

I visited him in hospital for the second time after an interval of three weeks or so. He still looked a sadly battered figure, but he no longer gave me the impression of being irreparably broken. He had recovered his voice, and was able to sit up in bed. He seemed in excellent spirits, moreover. His room was full of flowers and baskets of fruit. These gifts — and letters of sympathy and encouragement besides — had been pouring in from unknown admirers and personal friends. To him they represented a wholly unexpected assurance that he wasn't a complete outcast, and, as a result, he had evidently deluded himself into the hope that he would shortly be recalled to the West End stage. He talked of being "inundated with offers" and of having to decide which one to accept.

This was mere daydreaming. I had spoken with a number of managers about him and, though they had expressed themselves perfectly willing to drop "poor old Charley" a line, they had refused to believe that he would ever be employable again. According to his doctor, he had made remarkable progress and there was no reason why, organically speaking, he shouldn't eventually be well enough to lead a full and active life, but several more months in hospital lay ahead of him, and after that he would need to convalesce for as long, perhaps, as a year.

I thought it a healthy sign, however, that he should be capable of

such daydreaming. He said he knew that in many ways he'd treated Yvonne abominably. Just the same, he was sure she'd judged him unfairly almost from the day of their marriage, and when she'd "turned against him" in the end he'd been seized with an irresistible impulse to be the totally depraved creature she thought him. He could only describe this impulse as a form of "madness," and, now that he was rid of it, he was purged, too, of his resentment against Yvonne. He didn't expect her to return to him. All he asked was the chance to prove himself capable of "making good" on his own.

It could not have occurred to me that there was any way of his "making good on his own" except through resuming his career. However, as I knew there wasn't a West End manager who would risk employing him short of some extraordinary pressure being brought to bear on his behalf, I made it my business to exert such pressure. The weapon I used was my new play.

This was a light, a gossamer comedy. I thought that the principal part might do extremely well for Charley's reappearance, particularly as it was "showy" without being arduous. The character was a former philanderer who, grown too old for love himself, found delight in arranging the love affairs of others. It was a part largely composed of charm. When I described it to Charley, he expressed enthusiasm and demanded to see the script at once. "I'm sure I could act it on my head," he said. "And, you know, I like the idea of *masquerading* as an elderly gentleman. Then they won't notice what an elderly gentleman I've really turned into. They'll attribute all these lines and gray hair to grease paint and powder."

I had already finished the play before he left hospital. I called it *Autumn Frolic*. Hubert Langham saw it as a sure-fire commercial success, and wanted to produce it in the early autumn. I told him he couldn't, explaining that I had decided Charley must have the leading part and that production would have to be held up until sometime next year when Charley should be fit for work again. Plainly, Langham thought me foolhardy; but he didn't wish to lose the play to a rival management, and so he agreed to my proposition, though

doubtless with the mental reservation that sooner or later I would realize for myself it wasn't feasible.

I should have been unwilling to gamble on Charley without taking steps to have him cured of his desire to drink. His doctor at the hospital suggested that psychiatric treatment would be worth a trial and advised me to get in touch with a certain Dr. Lakin, who had taken over a large country house in the heart of the Cumberland lake district and turned it into a treatment home for alcoholics. Dr. Lakin was (according to my informant) a brilliant psychotherapist. It was his purpose to regenerate his patients, not only physically, but mentally.

Accordingly, I arranged to spend a week end with my friend Hugh Walpole at his Cumberland home, and wrote to Dr. Lakin requesting an appointment. He invited me to drive over for luncheon on Saturday.

I arrived late, for I had some difficulty in finding my way. I had expected the place to resemble a mental hospital, but it was indistinguishable from an ordinary country residence. Just its name, "Twinings," was inscribed on the outside gate. I should never have supposed that a treatment center for alcoholics lay beyond. Nor should I have guessed that the stoutish, ruddy-faced man dressed in loose-fitting tweeds, who was summoned from the dining room to greet me, was a psychiatrist.

"I'm sorry we didn't wait lunch for you," he said. "But I thought you must have been held up. Come along in."

There was a party of twenty or so seated at the long, brightly polished table: a few more men than women.

"Were they all patients?" I asked Dr. Lakin after we had adjourned to his consulting room.

"All — except the staff." He sat tilted back in the swivel chair at his desk. "I have an assistant therapist, a matron and three nurses living in at the moment. But we don't dress up in uniforms here — or anything of that sort. You see, the whole secret of helping alcoholics is to build up their self-respect, not increase their sense of

guilt. So the very worst thing you can do is to surround them with a lot of hired keepers: shut them off from the world and treat them like prisoners or lunatics."

"I'm very much interested to hear you say that. I've an idea that if you could have persuaded Charles Stranleigh's wife of the same thing a dozen years ago, I mightn't be here now."

"Really?" he coughed and put his pipe down. "Before we go into the case, there are a couple of things I want to make clear. In the first place, I guarantee nothing in advance, and it doesn't always happen that I'm prepared to give an assurance one way or the other, at the finish. No patient ever comes back here. That doesn't mean I've a 100 per cent record of success. Sometimes it merely means that I've done my best — and failed. You understand?"

I nodded.

"The other thing is, it's useless trying to cure anyone of alcoholism who isn't prepared to co-operate. Are you sure your friend Stranleigh really wants to stop drinking?"

"Oh, yes."

"You seem very certain of that; but, you know, the trouble with most alcoholics is that they don't, though they often like to pretend that they do. No reputable psychiatrist, whatever method he practices, claims to be a magician. He can't work miracles. He can only help people to help themselves."

"Well, I'm sure you'd find Charley co-operative," I said. "To begin with, I know how anxious he is to redeem himself. And then, as his doctor at the hospital has pointed out, he must really possess a lot of will power — or he'd never have survived this illness."

"Yes — his doctor wrote to me. I have the report somewhere here." He searched for it among his papers, and began reading it through: "A year's convalescence . . . Well, that's just about the length of time he'd need to stay here. Beginning of October, probable date of discharge . . . I could fit him in then all right. Cardiac condition . . . *hmm*." He threw down the paper and tilted back his chair again. "When did he first develop a tendency towards alcoholism?"

I proceeded to give him an account of Charley's case history. He took notes of the facts, but, whenever I ventured on a psychological deduction, he sat looking at me inscrutably, hands clasped behind his head, neither agreeing nor disagreeing.

"Well," he said when I was finished, "that gives me a good enough idea of the problem in general. Of course, there's no point in my speculating about the details until I've seen the patient."

Our interview ended there, save for a brief discussion about finance. The question was how his fees were going to be met in view of the fact that Charley himself had no means. I was prepared to pay the accounts for Charley as they came in or, alternatively, to make him a monthly allowance. But Dr. Lakin did not approve of either of these ideas. He thought it would be wiser to lend Charley a lump sum which, while it would enable him to discharge his own liabilities during his year of enforced idleness, he could look forward to repaying eventually. Dr. Lakin's fees, however, were extremely high and, short of selling out capital, I could not have raised as much money as was necessary. So I decided to enlist the assistance of Jasper Blake and various other old friends of Charley's.

I completed all these arrangements without telling Charley a word about them, and no doubt if Dr. Lakin had been aware of this, he would have told me it was just the sort of way to wound an alcoholic's pride and arouse his resentment.

The truth was I hadn't been altogether honest with Dr. Lakin. I had assured him that Charley would prove a co-operative patient, whereas I ought to have said that he would, *provided* I could persuade him to undergo psychiatric treatment. Though I was determined to succeed in this, I was none the less nervous of broaching the subject and I thought it necessary to await a suitable moment.

That moment came at last on a late September afternoon about a week before he was due to leave the hospital. He had been getting increasingly despondent as this prospect drew nearer, and now that it was so close upon him his mood was a mixture of panic and despair. I found him sitting in a deck chair on the lawn at the back

of the hospital building. He looked a picture of dejection, with a rug over his knees, an unwanted newspaper falling off his lap and a walking stick lying on the grass by his side. He gazed at me gloomily as I approached.

"I suppose you've heard I'm to be discharged shortly," he said as I began setting up the deck chair I had found for myself.

"Yes — but not dishonorably, you know."

He ignored this attempt at joculariry. "It's much too soon. I'm still as weak as a kitten. I can hardly hobble more than a few steps. Of course, I realize *why* they're in such a hurry to turn me out."

He fixed me with a challenging stare.

"Why?" I asked obediently.

"Because, my dear fellow, they naturally think the workhouse is the proper place for someone like me. They don't want a permanent invalid on their hands."

"Oh, that's plain nonsense, Charley. You're not a permanent invalid at all."

He shook his head slowly. "I am, Paul. It's no use trying to fool myself that I'll ever be fit enough to act again. You know how much I'd have given to appear in another play of yours. But it's too late now. I'm done for."

"I suppose it's natural you should feel like this at the moment. But there's no earthly reason why the doctor should lie to me. He says that providing you live quietly —"

"Ah, yes. *Providing*. But the trouble is, old darling, I can't trust myself."

I started talking rapidly. At the very first mention of the word "psychiatry," however, he interrupted me. I saw that he was sitting forward tensely, whereas up to now he had affected complete inertness. "Oh no, none of that. Whatever else I may be, I'm not a madman. You can pack me off to an old age pensioners' home, if you like. But I'm not going to an asylum."

"Twinings isn't an asylum — or anything remotely resembling one."

I went on to describe the place as idyllically as I could. This time he heard me out, and for several seconds afterwards we regarded each other in silence.

"Will you go?" I asked him at length.

"Well, I haven't much choice in the matter, have I? After all, my dear fellow, I'm in your hands. I take it this loan you've been good enough to raise for me is conditional on my doing as I'm told."

"No. You can spend it exactly as you please."

He pulled the rug further over him. "Anyhow, there's your play. Since you can't trust me apparently —"

"You said just now you couldn't trust yourself," I snapped, and regretted the words as soon as spoken. I stabbed the ground with my foot. "Charley, it isn't a question of trust, don't you see? If you're suffering from some physical ailment, you don't hesitate to go to a doctor. Well, alcoholism's the same sort of thing, surely. There's no need to feel ashamed that you have to be cured of it. It's a disease like —"

"A disease!" he exclaimed, as though a profound truth had suddenly been revealed to him. Then a distant look came into his eyes, and he added with quiet conviction, "Yes, that's just what it is. A disease." He sighed. "Very well, my dear Paul, if you honestly think I can't manage without a psychologist to guide me, I'll go to this retreat you've found for me. But I won't pretend I like the idea."

Presently a nurse came to escort him back to his room. He looked massive in his decrepitude as, leaning heavily on his stick, with the nurse supporting him by his free arm, he made of each step he took an effort and an achievement.

The nurse held the door of his room open for him, and he turned to bid me good-by. "You'll keep it dark where I'm going, won't you, Paul?" he said in a low voice. "After all, I shouldn't like it to become public knowledge that Charles Stranleigh's being put into a loony bin."

On the day of his discharge, I arranged for my chauffeur to meet him at the hospital in the early morning and drive him up to Cumber-

land. He could not have coped with a long train journey on his own.

In due course, I heard from my chauffeur that he had been safely deposited at Twinings. This was a relief, for I had been fully prepared for him to refuse to go at the last moment. A few days later, I received a letter from him that set all my fears at rest.

MY DEAR OLD PAUL,

This place is just as you described it: a minor Paradise for folks like me. Needless to say, I should have known better than to doubt your word. The fact that I did — and seemed so churlish and ungrateful, incidentally — is only because I'm so damned ashamed of myself and really hate being such a confounded nuisance to my friends. Now I'm already feeling a million times better in mind as well as body, and I must drop this line to say "God bless you." I'm amazed, by the way, to be thrown among my fellow sots and yet to find myself in such extraordinarily respectable company. Did you happen to meet Lady Blank and would you suspect, to look at her, that she'd drunk more than half a glass of *vin rosé* in the whole of her sweet and sheltered life? Last night we played charades, and Lady Blank gave a most convincing portrayal of Mrs. Gladstone at one point. I believe they call that type-casting in your world, my dear fellow. Anyhow, it's encouraging for me to realize that drunkards grow under every bush, as it were. Lakin's a really delightful chap, and, of course, an absolutely first-class doctor. We've had several talks already, and I'm sure that by the time he's through with me I shall be the asset you want, not the liability you must be so thoroughly sick of.

Ever your affectionate,

CHARLEY

* * *

When July came, and it was time to begin preparations for producing *Autumn Frolic*, I found Hubert Langham as sceptical as ever about the wisdom of employing Charley.

"He'll be all right," I told him. "I'll make a bargain with you, Hubert. Go and talk to him. If you're still unconvinced, I'll agree to reconsider the question."

"A pound to a shilling I don't change my mind."

"Taken."

What he said when he returned from his visit to Twinings was almost exactly what I should have predicted. "They've really done wonders with him up at that place, haven't they? Of course, he's not as young as he used to be. But I can't remember when I've seen him looking so fit. He must be as strong as a horse. He made me play three sets of tennis and go for a five-mile walk in the afternoon. I was exhausted at the end of it, I can tell you. But he hadn't turned a hair."

I laughed, remembering a similar experience. "Did you settle anything about the play?"

"Yes. He'll be ready to start work on the first of November. He says he'd like as much time as possible for rehearsals, so I think it'd be better if we didn't produce until after the New Year. Oh, incidentally," he took out his wallet and handed me a pound note. "You deserve a great deal more than this for your act of faith, Paul. I hope you get it."

I hadn't any doubt I would until, the day before Charley was due back in London, I received a lengthy report from Dr. Lakin:

Within limits Mr. Stranleigh has made good use of his time here. I fear, however, that I am unable to give you a positive assurance that he is now free of alcoholic tendencies. I do not think it inevitable that he will suffer a relapse, and I am certain that he will not start drinking again, merely as a matter of course. But I doubt whether he has learned sufficient self-control to be cured of his reliance on alcohol under stress.

He is, from the purely physical point of view, in a fit enough condition to resume his work, and I do not suggest that he should prolong his stay here because I am satisfied there

is little or no chance that he would respond further to the type of psychotherapy which we practice. The benefits of this treatment are somewhat dependent, of course, on the extent to which the doctor has the patient's confidence, and I regret to say that Mr. Stranleigh has never reposed his full confidence in me. I am not suggesting, please understand, that I have found him in any way hostile. On the contrary, he has invariably been an attentive listener and he has tried to discuss his difficulties frankly.

At the same time, I am convinced that he has concealed from me some vital underlying fact, and I suspect that he refuses to face or recognize this fact himself. I might have been able to get at it, if I had chosen to adopt an approach better suited to breaking down his resistance. But here I should have run the risk of doing him more harm than good in the end. There is always the danger of destroying creative talent in the process of building up control of emotional impulses, and I have had, of course, to be particularly on guard against this in his case. I have taken it for granted that he would not wish me to cure him of alcoholism at the risk or sacrifice of his career in the theater.

I understand that he will be staying with you until he has had an opportunity to settle down and find a place of his own in London. Under these circumstances I think I should warn you, as I have warned him, against suggestions to the effect that "one little drink" can't possibly hurt him. Suggestions of this kind, I should imagine, are likely to be made to him frequently — even by perfectly well-meaning people — and they will constitute most harmful advice. The longer he keeps off alcohol, the better his chances of remaining off it. There can be no safety for him unless he keeps off it completely, for the rest of his life. "One little drink," far from not hurting him, would almost certainly lead to another larger drink and, sooner or later, would result in a full-scale relapse.

He will — at any rate for some while to come — require a certain amount of protection. This should not be made too obvious. For example, there is no need to refrain, as a matter of

strict policy, from drinking in his presence, and such practices as hiding drink, keeping it locked up, etc. are certainly undesirable. On the other hand, he should, most definitely, be spared the strain of attending cocktail parties and so on.

To sum up: his case, though not hopeless, is in my view unsatisfactory. His determination to give up alcohol, and win back his self-respect, has undoubtedly been reinforced since he came here. I wish I could say it had been made secure.

I realize, in retrospect, that Charley had spent his year at Twinings like a reluctant soldier being patched up to fight again. In the end, though superficially fit for service, he was no better suited to face the hazards of success than he had ever been or ever could be. His creative talent, that Dr. Lakin had assumed must at all costs be preserved, was still his curse.

He arrived in London on a Sunday evening — rehearsals were due to begin next day — and I went to meet him at Euston Station. Despite the forebodings that Dr. Lakin's report had implanted in me, I expected him to be extremely elated, for during the past several months he had been expressing eagerness and impatience to get back into harness again. As it turned out, he could hardly have been more dismal. I saw him from a distance walking slowly down the platform, as though he had no desire to be anywhere or meet anyone. He was wearing a cap and an open raincoat that stood out before him in stiff folds.

"Charley!" I said, blocking his path. "Are you blind? Didn't you see me?"

"No."

"Anyway, how are you?"

He frowned — almost reprovingly. He seemed to be saying that my broad smile of welcome was quite inappropriate to the occasion, that I was like a man making merry at a funeral. "All right, thank you. Naturally, I'm rather tired."

"Well, you can have a rest when we get back."

"Get back where?"

"Aren't you staying with me?"

"I suppose so."

"If you'd rather go to a hotel —"

"No," he sighed, "I'd just as soon stay with you, my dear fellow. Besides, I presume you want to keep an eye on me."

We stood in silence while his luggage was unloaded from the van. He had used a part of his loan to buy himself a completely new outfit, but I noticed he was still in possession of that battered old suitcase I had recovered for him in Southampton. He had had this in the carriage with him.

"It must be getting on for two years since you were last in town, Charley," I remarked as we drove off in a taxi.

"Yes," he replied. "I fancy it must be."

A few seconds later, he reverted to this topic. "I suppose you'd be thrilled if you were in my shoes — returning to this — this cacophonous maelstrom." He turned a disgusted look on the Euston Road, which happened at that moment to be remarkably uncacophonous and almost as unlike a maelstrom as a good Sabbatarian would wish it to be on Sunday.

"Well, frankly," I said, resisting a temptation to laugh at him, "I'm always thrilled to see London again."

"That's because you were born and grew up here, my dear fellow. Personally, I'd be only too delighted if I never had to lay eyes on the place again. I loathe it."

As if to prove his point, he closed his eyes. He didn't open them again until we had reached my house, which was in Smith Street, Westminster.

"I hope you haven't arranged any celebration for me tonight," he said after I had shown him his room on the top floor.

"No."

"That's good. Although I can understand you wouldn't want to. I take it the idea's to keep me as isolated as possible."

"My dear Charley, I want you to feel free to do exactly as you

please while you're staying with me. As far as tonight's concerned, I've ordered dinner in, but we can always go out if you prefer. The Langhams said they might drop round afterwards."

"The Langhams? Oh, I'm sorry, my dear fellow, but I'm afraid you'll have to excuse me. I couldn't possibly cope with *them* tonight. I'll be seeing quite enough of Hubert, as it is, during the coming weeks. And I've never cared for his wife. She has sticking-out teeth and a stuck-up manner. The fact that Hubert married her shows to what extraordinary lengths a real snob will go."

This, as it happened, was a shrewd thrust, for Hubert Langham did have a pronounced weakness for social position. But Charley's remark at the moment came as just a further installment of his apparently determined petulance, and I wondered how much longer I should be able to put up with this. I supposed that once I lost patience and spoke sharply to him, he would automatically be under what Dr. Lakin called "stress" and there would be the end of any hope of his keeping off alcohol. I began to consider whether I might not suggest to him tactfully that he would be better off staying on his own somewhere.

At dinner, however, for which he dressed, explaining that he had grown used to doing so every night at Twinings, he became more affable. "I'm glad to see you're not abstaining on my account, Paul," he said after I had accepted a glass of wine. "I was afraid you might, you know, and then I should have felt obliged to renounce your hospitality. I'm perfectly happy to be a teetotaler myself. But I should hate to be thought an aggressive one. I always found Yvonne's habit of making our guests suffer for my sins most distasteful. Have you seen her, by the way?"

"Not for some time."

"I expect she'd tell you you were insane to put your trust in me, Twinings or no Twinings."

"Oh, I don't think she would," I lied. "I'm sure she wouldn't if she talked to Lakin."

"Lakin's a most persuasive fellow, isn't he?" he smiled. . . . "Per-

haps you'd like to hear me my lines afterwards; I fancy I'll surprise you."

He did. He was word perfect.

"I'm overcome," I said as I handed him back the thick typescript of his part.

"We must give a repeat performance for the Langhams," he chuckled. "They ought to be here any minute, oughtn't they?"

"The Langhams? They're not coming now."

"I thought you said they were."

"I said they might drop round. But after you'd told me you didn't want to see them, I rang up and put them off."

"Oh, but my dear fellow, you shouldn't have done that." He got up. "You shouldn't have taken me so literally."

He stood for a moment jingling the money in his pocket. "My nerves are a bit on edge, I'm afraid. Twinings is a wonderful place, and I'm sure I'll realize in the end how much I've benefited from my time there. But, in a way, it spoils you, you know. You get too accustomed to having no worries or responsibilities, and I imagine the longer one stays there the harder it is to leave."

"But, Charley, you told me at least three months ago you'd had enough of it, and wanted to get back to work."

"I did — I do. And don't imagine, my dear fellow, I'm lukewarm about your play. I'm not. But you must admit it's quite a responsibility I've taken on, after being out of things for so long, and frankly the thought of it's put me into rather a panic."

"I don't honestly think you've much to be afraid of," I said, indicating the typescript of his part.

"Oh yes. I've proved to myself I can still learn lines, haven't I?"

"But what?" I asked after a pause.

He sat down again. "I might as well confess to you, Paul, that I went to Lakin yesterday and begged him to keep me on a little longer. I said I wasn't ready to leave. He told me I was, and I knew in my heart that I was just being cowardly, but that didn't help me much at the time." He hesitated. His manner now was devoid of all

its usual affectations. It was as though he were a dignitary who had suddenly thrown off his robes. "I still had a terrible fear," he resumed quietly, "that I wouldn't be able to face the journey without a drink."

"You haven't had one, have you?" I was leaning forward anxiously.

"It was a damned close shave, Paul." He passed a hand over his eyes. "I went as far as buying some brandy last night; just a quarter of a bottle; I tried to persuade myself it was merely a medical precaution. But, of course, old Lakin would have seen through that."

"Have you brought it with you?"

"If I had, it would all be in here by now." He tapped his stomach. "No, I got up very early this morning, and I threw the bottle in the lake. Not as easily as that, though. I had an awful struggle before I could do it. I was all alone; you can walk for miles along that lake, you know, without meeting a soul. I kneeled down, Paul, and I prayed for help and I think my prayer must have been answered. I was literally sweating with funk, though, as the bottle went to the bottom. Lakin saw me off. I believe he guessed what I'd been through."

He looked at me, and once more I saw that expression of simple perplexity on his face that I hadn't seen there for a long while, but remembered so well. "It was such a wrench leaving Twinings, you see. But now that I've done it, I think the worst must be over, don't you?"

"I'm sure it must be," I said, with only a very faint hope that this could be true.

That faint hope rose steadily during rehearsals. He conducted himself with complete serenity, and at the end nobody doubted his mastery over his part. An hour or so before the actual performance, however, I despaired again.

We had had an early meal, and I had gone to dress. Suddenly, I heard an agonized shout, "Paul!" — and he burst into my room.

He was wild-eyed, and his whole body seemed to be trembling, as though palsied.

"Paul! Paul old fellow, you must ring up Hubert at once. Tell him to warn the understudy."

"What on earth are you talking about?"

"I'm ill. I can't go on."

"You were all right a few minutes ago."

"I'm ill now. Can't you see I'm ill?"

"Now look here, Charley — " I stepped up to him.

"You must telephone Hubert!"

"I'm not going to do anything of the sort."

"Then you must let me have a drink. I can't face them without a drink." He was almost sobbing. "I tell you I can't, Paul."

"You can, Charley. You've got to."

"I'm ill. Seriously ill."

"You're nervous," I said, propelling him towards a chair. "That's all. You'll get through all right. Don't worry."

I made him swallow a couple of aspirins. I talked persuasively. I pled with him to remember that his whole future was at stake. I reminded him that in a sense I had pledged my own professional reputation on his good behavior. Eventually I managed to get him out of the house and into a taxi.

I arrived at the theater only just in time for the curtain.

When I joined Langham in our box, I was prepared for him to tell me that Charley had not turned up. But he seemed perfectly calm, and I said nothing. The play began. Charley appeared and received a tremendous ovation from an audience largely composed of those who had pronounced his career finished three years ago, and were now clearly hoping against hope that he would confound them. While the ovation lasted, he stood with his head bowed, just as he had done after making his entrance in *The Lost Prince*. And, just as had happened then, when he opened his mouth to speak, not his voice, but the prompter's was heard.

I jumped up with the intention of leaving the box. Langham

seized me by the arm, and practically forced me to sit down again. "The blithering idiot," he hissed. He was referring to the prompter, not to Charley. Had I been in a less distraught state of mind, I might likewise have perceived that Charley did not need to be reminded of his opening line. He only needed a moment or two to recover his power of speech. The warmth of his reception had taken him un-awares, and he was overcome by emotion.

From then on, all was well. At the end, I stood with Langham in the wings. We were waiting to take our calls, but, as the applause reached us, like peals of thunder each time the curtain rose, I knew it was all for Charley.

"We're home," Langham said exultantly.

"He is anyway."

"Thanks to you, Paul. You've given them back a great actor as well as providing them with an excellent new play. I feel sorely tempted to tell them so."

"For God's sake, don't!"

Charley himself behaved as though he had never doubted for a moment he would succeed and consequently saw no reason to evince relief or jubilation. "These people who come swarming round . . ." he said, after he had bowed out the last of his dressing-room visitors. "I used to feel flattered by their attentions. But I've grown too old a bird for that now." He yawned. "I suppose you'll want to sit up until the morning papers come out, won't you, my dear fellow? I'm afraid I'm past that sort of thing myself. I'm for bed."

Actually, his triumph was greater than I had ever bargained for, because nearly all the critics extolled his performance at the expense of my play. "*Autumn Frolic* may not be the wittiest comedy in the English language," the most influential of them wrote, "or even the funniest that has come from the pen of Mr. Paul Hunter, but it brings Mr. Charles Stranleigh back to the stage, and for the moment that is all that matters."

Charley expressed satisfaction with the notices, but he made it clear that his pleasure was on my account, not his own. "Well, old

darling," he said, after he had read them through at breakfast with painstaking care, "the wise men evidently think I've done all right for you, don't they? I fancy you've got a winner."

"If I have it, it's entirely due to you, Charley," I said.

And there was no denying the truth of this, as I told Langham, when he telephoned me later during the morning to commiserate with me on the rough treatment I'd received at the hands of the critics and to cheer me up with wonderful reports from the box office.

"The play could have been just as popular with any competent actor in the part," he said. "I was certain of that when I first read it."

"You may have been right, Hubert. But don't you realize that whatever the critics say is true — provided they say it loudly enough? The only reason people will come and see *Autumn Frolic* now is because Charley's in it. If we lost him, we'd be sunk."

"You're not frightened we *will* lose him, are you?"

"Well, I showed you Lakin's report. There's always a chance he'll have a relapse. At any time."

"Oh, I can't believe he will, after this. I can't believe he'd be quite such a fool."

That was my own view, more or less; and the fact that during the next three months he stuck tenaciously to the safeguards Dr. Lakin had prescribed for him confirmed me in it. At his own suggestion, he stayed on in my house — he said he didn't "feel strong enough yet" to live by himself. I had no need to prompt him to avoid what Dr. Lakin had called the "strain of attending cocktail parties and so on." Socially speaking, he seemed resolved to lead the life of a recluse. At first, invitations poured in on him but they gradually dwindled after he made it known that he never "went out" nowadays.

At the beginning of April, when *Autumn Frolic* was firmly established as the biggest success in town, it was bought by an American motion picture company as a vehicle for a famous Hollywood star, and I received an offer to go out to Hollywood and supervise the preparation of the film script. Remembering how Charley had dis-

liked the idea of another actor appearing in his Wainewright part, I was careful about the way I broke the news to him. Langham, I explained, would never agree to release him and anyway the film version would probably turn out to bear little or no relation to the stage play. He appeared satisfied. The only concern he expressed was whether I should want to let the house during my absence.

"Oh no," I said. "I shan't be gone more than a few weeks. The house is yours, Charley, for as long as you care to stay."

"That's very good of you, my dear fellow," he said. "I must admit I'd prefer not to move. I'm becoming rather set in my ways, you know."

The hundredth performance came on April 25, a few weeks before I was due to leave for Hollywood.

"Are you going to little Cecilia's party tonight?" he asked. We had just finished breakfast, and he was about to begin reading his morning paper in earnest; from first page to last.

"No," I said firmly.

"I think you should, Paul."

"Why?"

"Well, it's rather sporting of the child to give it."

I didn't agree. Cecilia was the daughter of a dead Earl and the sister of a live one. Although she was young in years, she was not so in experience of the world. She did pretty much as she pleased, for she had come into a small fortune on her father's death and she was quite independent of her mother. Cecilia had a tiny part in *Autumn Frolic*. She didn't need the job, and there were scores of out-of-work actresses who could have done it better than she. However, most managers allow themselves to be influenced by some kind of human frailty when they come to casting a play, and Cecilia was the current example of Hubert Langham's snobbery. She had asked for the part, and, because she had a title, Langham hadn't been able to say no.

I resented her presence in the cast on principle, and I thought it inappropriate that she should take advantage of her position to give

a kind of official party in celebration of the hundredth performance.

"Personally," I said, "I regard all these little Cecílias as a blight, and I don't think we ought to encourage them. They're just slumming in the theater. Cecilia isn't serious about acting. She's only on the stage for want of a better way to amuse herself. In a year or so's time she'll marry one of her own kind, and that'll automatically be the end of her career."

He pointed an accusing finger at me. "You're an inverted snob, old darling."

"I'm not. I'm simply a good Tory. I believe in everyone knowing his place, Cecilia included. Which reminds me," I said, getting up and stretching, "my place is at my desk."

"I'm going to the party, Paul."

"You're what?" I rounded on him. He sat looking at me impassively over his newspaper.

"You seem surprised?" he said, as though he relished the fact that I was.

"Well, naturally I am."

"I fancy a lot of other people will be, too." He adjusted his spectacles. "But, you see, I couldn't resist Cecilia. She bet someone five quid she'd be able to persuade me to come, and then had the cheek to tell me about it. Don't you think that was rather an enchanting approach? She deserves to win."

"Do you really mean to say you're prepared to jeopardize your health merely because you'd like this girl to win some silly bet?"

"Oh, I shall probably only look in for a few moments. But I'm tired of living like an old fossil. It's high time I proved to myself that I can go about normally if I choose — and not come to grief. Otherwise, I might just as well be dead and buried."

I was dumbfounded. I tried to think of something to say that might dissuade and not offend him. Finally, I simply shrugged my shoulders, and left the room.

However, I decided there was a chance I could talk Cecilia into undoing the harm she'd done, and I went to the theater that evening

with the idea of having a word with her during the performance.

I met her as she was coming off the stage. "What are you doing here, darling?" she said. Though we were virtual strangers, it was part of her pose as a modern young actress to affect an intimate manner with everyone in the theater — particularly authors and managers. "I thought you were out of town?"

"No."

"Then I think it's perfectly bloody of you not to come to my party. After all, I'm practically giving it for you."

"Well, I'd like to come, my dear. The trouble is Charley Strangleigh's living with me at the moment, and it wouldn't be very fair to him if —"

"Oh, Charley'll be there."

"I know he's promised you he will. I want you to let him off."

She glanced round at me, cigarette smoke coming from her mouth. "Not on your life, darling."

"Look, Cecilia, when Charley says he's not well enough to go out to parties, he's telling the literal truth. So, though I can understand you thought it a good joke to have a bet —"

"You knew about that, too?" She gave a gurgling laugh.

"Yes. And it honestly isn't at all funny."

"I think it is, rather."

"You wouldn't if you realized what the consequences might be."

"Wouldn't I?"

"Haven't you any feelings for other people?" I was getting exasperated.

"Of course I have, darling, and I am sure it will do Charley a lot of good to get out a bit more. He needs livening up. After all, he still has the reputation of being about the most attractive man in the world, hasn't he?" She made a kind of twiddling movement with her fingers. She had unusually pretty hands and liked to show them off. "It's absurd for him to remain shut up in a sort of self-imposed monastery."

I gasped. "So it's you who's put the idea into his head, is it?"

"What idea, darling?"

"Oh, it doesn't matter."

I recognized now that I'd embarked on a hopeless mission. This girl was too selfish to care how much harm she did Charley. Obviously, she'd set out to influence him, and she meant to go on doing so. She'd as good as told me that she fancied him as her lover or at least fancied herself donned with the reputation of being his mistress.

"Won't you change your mind, darling? You haven't any excuse, you know, now that Charley's coming."

"He's not there yet."

She moved lithely past me, and glanced back to give me an enemy's bright smile. "Want to bet?" she said.

I didn't, for I knew perfectly well that I should lose.

Within a week or two it had become gossip that Cecilia was Charley's mistress, and that for her sake he had thrown all his erstwhile precautions overboard. Considering that he seldom got home before the early hours of the morning, he could not conceal from me that there had been a revolution in his manner of living. Nor did he deny that Cecilia was the whole cause of this. But he protested that he was benefiting, not suffering from it. Cecilia had opened his eyes to the truth, he said. She had shown him that Dr. Lakin's warnings were not oracular, as he had once supposed, but merely deadening in their effect. Lakin had tried to turn him into an old man, whereas Cecilia was making him young again.

In fact, Cecilia was turning him into a kind of rejuvenated escort; a middle-aged lover who had to keep up with his pleasure-fond mistress; a veteran of the supper tables brought back on parade. Whether she was actually encouraging him to drink I could not tell. But she was certainly putting him under a strain which, if Lakin were right, must sooner or later prove intolerable.

Yet, I didn't see Cecilia as anything worse than a danger which, with luck, could be averted. It could be averted, I told Langham, by removing her from the cast. After all, I argued, it wasn't as if she had the slightest intention of marrying Charley. Her designs on him were

of an essentially frivolous nature. He was just incidental to the amusement she got out of being on the stage: a sort of trophy. There were other such trophies she could seek while she continued to call herself an actress. Once she had left *Autumn Frolic*, the affair would peter out, and Charley would revert to his sensible regimen.

Ordinarily speaking, Langham might have quailed at the idea of losing the services of a lady of title. But he agreed with me it was the only possibility after he had tried appealing to her better nature and found, as I had done before him, that apparently she hadn't one. Still, he couldn't simply dismiss her, for she might lodge a complaint with Equity, and he would have no defense; at least none he could disclose. What he did, therefore, was to use his influence to procure her the offer of another and much better part in a play that was going out on tour. He assumed she would accept it.

The last Saturday evening before my departure for America, he met me at the theater with a long face, and suggested we should go down to the bar. It was empty, for the performance was in progress.

"Well," he said, "it's no good. She's refused the part. Says she doesn't want to leave London."

"I was afraid of that."

He frowned at his glass. "I don't see what more I can do. I suppose it's possible Charley will survive this siege."

"It's possible," I said, fiddling with the ash tray on the bar counter, "but frankly I shall be surprised if the play's still running when I get back from Hollywood."

"Paul, can't you talk some sense into him?"

"I doubt it. I admit I haven't tried very hard, but, you see, the trouble is Cecilia's managed to personify his vanity, and that's what you're really attacking if you start criticizing her. She's made him want to believe he can lead the sort of life she's forcing on him, so it's not much use telling him he can't. Still, I'll have another shot at it, if you like."

"I wish you would. It seems to me our only hope."

"Unless you can find some other way of getting rid of her."

He put his glass down with a thump. "I'd sack her tomorrow, Paul, if I had any reasonable excuse."

He sacked her the day after. But he might have saved himself the trouble, for by then there was no point left in it.

Charley had told me he would be spending the week end with Cecilia. They drove down after the show to her brother's place in the country. On Monday evening I looked in at the theater around ten o'clock. I had been dining out and was on my way home.

Langham was in his office, sitting at his old-fashioned, roller-top desk, writing a letter.

"Oh, it's you, Paul," he said. "I thought it was Cecilia. Well, you're just in time for the execution."

"Hers?"

"Yes," he said. "They both turned up late tonight. We held the curtain long enough for Charley to get changed. She missed her entrance, and the understudy had to go on. That does it, I think."

"I see," I said doubtfully, stroking my chin.

"Don't you agree? Good God, you've been worrying the life out of me to find a pretext."

"Yes. But I'm wondering whether it would be altogether wise under the circumstances. This is discrimination."

"Oh, it isn't really. After all —"

Before he could complete the sentence, the culprit herself appeared. "You here, too, darling?" she said with a glance in my direction. "Quite an inquisition."

"Perhaps I'd better clear out, Hubert."

"Oh, for God's sake don't even consider it," she said. "I'm at my very best being hauled over carpets. What a pretty carpet this is, too."

She sank into the huge armchair that Langham kept for his most distinguished visitors, and was almost swallowed up in it.

Langham cleared his throat. "Cecilia, you know, don't you, that in the theater there's no excuse for being late."

"Oh yes, darling, of course I do. But this wasn't my fault."

"I said there was no excuse."

"Now look, darling. It doesn't matter a damn, honestly, who plays my silly little part. But you wouldn't have liked an understudy going on for Charley, would you?"

"What's that got to do with it?"

"Everything. Because Charley didn't want to come to the theater at all tonight. He wanted to run away with me instead. If I'd taken him seriously we'd be in Tahiti or somewhere by now, going quietly native together. Honestly, darling, I practically had to drag him here. He's been in a ghastly state all day. Half cuckoo."

"Half cuckoo with what?" Langham snapped.

"Well, with a bloody awful hangover in the first place; and galloping alcoholic remorse in the second."

I jumped up, and saw that Langham had done likewise. He was red with anger. Cecilia glanced casually from one to the other of us, as though she considered we were guilty of a rather vulgar display.

There was a long silence. I was the first to break it.

"He was drunk last night, then?" I said stiffly.

"Yes, darling. We had a little party, and he passed out. Not in public. He disappeared halfway through. I thought he didn't like the guests. We found him afterwards lying among the rhododendrons."

"And today?"

"I tell you — he wanted to fly the country. He said he couldn't possibly show his face in London again. But he's more or less all right now, I think. He needed a few pick-me-ups —"

"Had he been drinking before last night?"

"Only in moderation."

"When did he start?"

"Darling, I haven't kept a logbook. What is all this?"

"You knew from the very beginning he wasn't allowed to drink, didn't you?" I had turned on her, and was shouting. "You knew what would happen —"

Langham brought his fist down on the desk. "Cecilia, I consider

your behavior unforgivable. I'm sorry — but I don't want you in my theater any longer."

"Oh." She got up and smoothed down her dress. "The boot?"

"If that's what you choose to call it — yes."

"It's not very fair, you know." She pouted. "Unless, of course, you're proposing to sack Charley as well."

"His case is entirely different."

"Oh, I'm sure it is, darling," she said, going out. "But I wonder if he'll agree that it is."

Langham stood for a second or two in silence. "I suppose I shouldn't have lost my temper. But I think I was entitled to sack her, don't you?"

I almost laughed. "My dear Hubert, as far as I'm concerned, you were entitled to throttle her. But Charley's started drinking again, and, Cecilia or no Cecilia, he won't be able to stop. You can bid a long farewell to *Autumn Frolic*. In fact," I said, glancing at my watch, "I think I'll go in front for a bit. It may be the last chance I'll ever get of seeing him on the stage."

After the performance I went straight home. He must have followed a few hours later, though I hardly expected him to. I didn't hear him go up to his room, but he tripped and fell at the bottom of the stairs on his way down, and the noise woke me up. It was early dawn by then. I found him in the hall, and I realized at once he was moving out. He was wearing his hat and overcoat, and was kneeling in front of his old green suitcase. It had burst open, and he was making fumbling efforts to shut it again. He was swearing like a trooper under his breath. Each time he managed to fasten one side, the other would pop up mockingly.

He didn't hear me approach, and for a while I stood watching him, leaning against the banisters. He was re-embarked on a familiar journey, I told myself. He was returning, figuratively speaking, to that stinking room in Southampton. And, as usual, he was leaving the majority of his belongings behind. I imagined his one be-

draggled piece of luggage filled once more with a number of haphazardly collected oddments. I remembered Jean's book. He would have packed that instinctively, I presumed. Then it suddenly occurred to me that the suitcase must likewise be something he'd clung to through the years. Probably, it was identical with the one he'd had with him when he returned from a carouse on the evening Lise's baby was born dead and the same as the one he'd taken with him when he fled to the Sandersons'. It might even be the suitcase I'd carried up the platform for him when he left Manchester to go on the stage. Most likely it was.

He began swearing more loudly. "Let me give you a hand," I said at last.

His head jerked up, and the lid of the suitcase flew open. He extended an arm dramatically, pointing at nowhere in particular. "Get out!"

"I gathered that's what you were doing."

"I am. *Tout de suite.*"

But he allowed me to help him shut the suitcase. "Thanks, old fellow," he said, clumsily brushing the dust from his trouser legs. "I'm sorry I disturbed your slumbers."

"Isn't this rather an unceremonious departure?"

"You've no more use for me. I'm resigning my part in your play."

"Why?"

"Why, old cock?" He straightened, then staggered. He put a hand to the banister rail to steady himself. "Because I won't work for that bloody Pontius Pilate, Langham. And you conspired with him. Of course, I can understand right enough why the two of you fired Cecilia without firing me. But I'm not standing for it. I'm not standing for injustice."

"I suppose she's put you up to this?"

"Nobody's put me up to it. It's my own decision, old cock. And if you've any idea of dissuading me you can save your breath to cool your porridge."

"How drunk *are* you?"

"I'm not drunk. Not a bit drunk. And, if I am, it's your fault. You're a Judas, Paul. A bloody Judas."

"I'm afraid that's what you are, Charley. A Judas to yourself. A Judas to everyone who's tried to help you."

"Do you imagine you've helped me?"

"Do you imagine Cecilia has?"

"Shut your trap."

I sat down on the stairs and leaned my head in my hands. I wished he'd go. But he stood there, as if tempting me to a further onslaught against his irrationality. "I warn you, Charley, if you chuck up your part in the play, there'll be nothing more I can do for you."

"That's it, old cock, you're off to Hollywood. Thanks to your obedient servant."

"There won't be a manager in London who'll employ you."

"Shan't ask them to. I'm getting right out of London any road. I'm going somewhere where there aren't any mucking managers."

"Well, I hope you're not expecting Cecilia to go with you."

"Shut —"

"Because I can assure you she won't — whatever she may have told you. She's only interested in getting her own back on Hubert and myself. She'll drop you like a hot brick when it suits her."

"All right, old cock," he said, releasing his hold of the banister rail and swaying backwards. "She's a bitch. Her friends and relations are a lot of snobs. I'm a sot. But you're just a bloody parasite. All you want me for is to keep your play running. You know it's no bloody good without Charles Stranleigh."

"How dare you say that?" I exclaimed, jumping to my feet. I should have supposed myself impervious to his drunken abusiveness, but this was more than I could tolerate. It was not so much the unfairness of the accusation that stung me as its plausibility. I was trembling with anger.

"A bloody parasite," he went on, his eyes swimming, his chin thrust forward. "The play was the thing, wasn't it, old cock? You were

determined to have me in the play. That's why you sent me to Twinings. That's why you forced me to leave when I wasn't well enough. That's why you've tried to keep me locked up . . ."

"Oh, for God's sake, clear out!" I turned my back on him, and started walking up the stairs.

"Delighted," he shouted after me. "And kindly keep out of my way in the future. If it hadn't been for you, I'd never have gone on the stage. I'd never have set foot in this mucking town."

I didn't stop. I didn't heed him at all, and he yelled at the top of his lungs, "You've been my evil genius from the beginning, understand! That's what you've been, Paul. My evil genius from the beginning!"

It was his Parthian shot. I had reached the landing, when the front door slammed. As I heard it, I remembered other doors he had slammed on our friendship; but this one, I decided, must be the last. I didn't want it reopened. He had taxed my patience too far.

I left for America next day, and I never saw him again. He failed to turn up at the theater that evening, and in due course I heard he'd made good his threat of "resigning" from *Autumn Frolic*. The play was soon withdrawn.

My stay in America was prolonged for six years. Time and distance eventually dulled my anger with him, and, if he had written to me, or appealed for help, I should certainly have responded. But I was just as glad he didn't, and the memory of those parting words of his relieved me of any feeling that I ought to inquire after him. Even though I assured myself it was absurd to have taken them seriously, or hold him accountable for them, considering how drunk he'd been, they continued to rankle with me whenever I recalled them.

It was only after his death that I realized why. The reason was, of course, that they were true. I don't imagine for a moment that he decided to leave me Jean's book in order to convince me of this. I don't imagine he remembered afterwards that he'd made the accusation, and if he did, I feel sure he was ashamed. I think he wanted

me to have the book because he hoped I might understand what it had meant to him and knew there was no one else who could.

Now I do understand. I admit, too, that in a sense he was right to have called me his "evil genius." But I have tried to make him recompense.

Epilogue

EPILOGUE

THERE WAS a moment when I thought I should have to leave my story incomplete, for Bella Sugeley refused to give me the additional information I required.

I called on her for the second time one Friday afternoon in the autumn of 1942, when I was on my way to spend the week end with Yvonne, who was living permanently in Knutsford. To my consternation, I found that Miss Sugeley was just as disapproving of my idea for a biography of Charley now that it was carried out as when it had first occurred to me. In vain, I tried to persuade her that Charley's failings were too well known to be ignored and that I should serve his memory better by making known the cause of them than by pretending they didn't exist. She listened to my arguments politely, but she always reverted to the same point: what she wanted and — far more important — what Charley himself would want was a simple tribute to his acting; nothing else. If I needed her formal permission to publish the book, I had it. But she would not help me.

Yvonne, on the other hand, from whom I had anticipated some objection, proved more than amenable.

"You don't expect me to read all this?" she said, fingering the typescript.

"I think, perhaps, you should — before it's published."

"Oh, I'm sure it's not at all flattering to me. I know I was supposed to have treated Charley in quite the wrong way. But you didn't do any better, remember, when you had him on your hands that time. Nobody could have coped with him."

"He didn't need coping with," I said. "That was the mistake we all made. You see, Jean was right. He ought never to have gone on the stage."

There was a pause while she flicked through some more pages of the typescript.

"You know, he wrote to me a year or two before he died," she said.

"What about?"

"Screeds asking for bygones to be bygones. He wanted me to go and see him."

"Did you?"

"No — but Gerald did, several times." She glanced at the large silver-framed photograph on the piano of a strikingly handsome young man in uniform. "Taken at the beginning of the war," she said. She'd already told me Gerald was serving in the Army overseas.

"How did they get on?" I asked, remembering the boy's contempt for his father.

"Quite well," she said rather grudgingly. "Gerald was an undergraduate at the time — all very sophisticated and worldly-wise — and, of course, he'd forgotten anything he ever knew about Charley. Charley was just a romantic name to him. Now he has more or less your idea. He can't believe his father was ever worse than naïve. Charley used to give him 'good advice' and solemnly hand him a pound note at the end of every visit."

"Where did he get the pound from?" I laughed.

"Charley? Oh, he had a tiny income of his own by then. Somebody'd left him a few thousands. Somebody he'd loaned money to at one time. Long before I knew him."

"Not Bill Sanderson?"

"Some name like that. Gerald could tell you."

I was thinking how providentially this inheritance must have come to Charley. Without it the peace he'd enjoyed in the winter of his days would still have eluded him. He *could* have gone back to the stage, so Bella Sugeley had said, and, rather than live on

charity, I felt sure he'd have made the try. "When did he come into this money?"

"Gerald could tell you that, too. It was somewhere around 1937. Not long after the Sugeley woman took him in. What's the joke?"

"The Sugeley woman. It's such an inapt description of her."

"Oh, I've gathered from Gerald she's the purest thing on earth."

"She's about the most obstinate, too." I described the abortive interview I'd had with her earlier.

"What were you hoping to find out?"

"Well, to begin with, how she met Charley."

"Oh, I know that story."

She proceeded to tell it to me. Bella, she said, was in her early fifties at the time the meeting took place. Her widowed father had died only a short while before, and all her adult life had been spent looking after him. Though he had left her reasonably well off, she had no career and little or no chance of marrying. She didn't quite know what she would do with herself from now on. She thought she might take in paying guests. But she decided she needed a break, first of all, and so she went to Blackpool for a few weeks. That was in March of 1936, in the off-season.

She put up at an inexpensive boarding house. It was patronized for the most part by elderly people who were in Blackpool for the air, not for the organized pleasures. She was surprised to find a famous actor staying there. He used to give recitations in the lounge after the evening meal. Somebody told her he couldn't get a job on the stage, that he had practically no money and that he was forced to entertain the guests in this way as the price of his board and lodging. (Actually, Yvonne said, Charley survived a second critical illness in 1935. He may have gone to Blackpool afterwards to convalesce, but by March he must have run through whatever resources he had left and have been reduced to the position in which Bella found him.)

Bella could see for herself he was a very sick man. He gave his

recitations seated. Apparently, he hadn't the strength to stand up for any length of time. It seemed to her a shame that he should have to work at all.

Nevertheless, she thought he recited beautifully. It was a real treat to listen to him. He wasn't any less deserving of her admiration because he happened to be down on his luck. Quite the contrary.

It was some while before she ventured to speak to him. She had been half afraid he would be angry, or lofty or patronizing in his manner to her. But he wasn't a bit. He treated her as though she were his equal; a mark of true greatness in him, she was sure. His mother, he told her, had died nearly forty years ago, but he still missed her, so he could understand how she must miss her father. Had she lived in Manchester all her life? He could tell, of course, that she was a Mancunian. He had always loved Manchester himself, and meant to retire there eventually. But he couldn't retire yet unfortunately. He was an actor, and an actor's job was never really over. He had been ill, as she may have heard, but now he was on the mend, and the London managers were already pestering him to get back into harness. They considered he'd been idle long enough. They were hard taskmasters.

That was all the conversation she had with him before the "trouble" happened, but it won him her devotion. She never afterwards wavered in her belief that he was a good man who didn't deserve his ill fortune, who had suffered rather than sinned.

"I can't tell you what the 'trouble' was exactly," Yvonne said, "because she's always skimmed over that part of the story with Gerald. But it's not hard to guess, of course. I imagine Charley must have appeared drunk one evening, don't you, and started reciting Rabelais or something instead of Tennyson. Anyway, he was asked to leave in a hurry. If the Sugeley person hadn't offered him a home, he'd have been out in the street — literally. She took him back to Manchester with her."

"The suburban nook he might have had with Jean," I said. "I'm glad he found it in the end."

Yvonne got up. "Do you really think he'd have stayed with her if he could have gone back to the stage?"

"He could have gone back to the stage."

"So *she* says. And perhaps he did get a few offers eventually. But he must have realized all along he hadn't enough stamina left to act."

"In a sense, he never did have."

She ignored the interruption. "You know what killed him, I suppose?"

"Well, I heard at the time he died of a cerebral hemorrhage."

"Yes. He went out to make a record of some sort, got back to the house and promptly had a stroke. Even that little effort —"

"The record of the Crispin speech, you mean? Bella played it to me. But she didn't say it was that which —"

"It was. She wrote Gerald a long letter afterwards. I've still got it somewhere around. I'll see if I can dig it out for you when we've had dinner."

She did as she promised, and I took the letter up with me to read in bed.

Charley had felt in duty bound to make the record, Bella wrote, and quite possibly the effort had precipitated the stroke that followed.

He lingered on for several days afterwards. He had time enough to make his final dispositions, but it was difficult for him to do so, for he was partially paralyzed, and his voice was reduced to a barely intelligible croak.

It was anguish for Bella to see him in this state, and she was glad he did not last longer. But what she described as a miraculous thing happened before the very end. He recovered. When she brought him in his early morning cup of tea as usual, she found him sitting up in bed. At first she thought he must have had a bad night, but then she saw that he was smiling and was looking peaceful and happy. She asked him how he'd slept. The voice in which he answered her was the old magical one, full and clear. She went to

help him on with his dressing gown, and as she did so he fell forward in her arms. He was dead.

I know how really proud of you he was, Gerald. And I hope you'll always be proud of him. Whatever the private difficulties he had, there must be thousands who will never forget the pleasure he gave them. He was a great actor.

As I read those words, I knew that Bella, in her simple trustfulness, had singled out the only thing that mattered. "He was a great actor." It was at once the tragedy and the justification of his life.

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